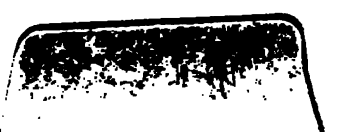

THE GIRL FROM THE BIG HORN COUNTRY

"Rode down the hill into the valley"

(See page 15)

THE GIRL
FROM THE
BIG HORN COUNTRY

By MARY ELLEN CHASE

Illustrated by

R. FARRINGTON ELWELL

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TO THE MEMORY

of my Father

WHO, PERHAPS, KNOWS, AND IS GLAD

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THE GIRL FROM THE BIG HORN COUNTRY

CHAPTER I

VIRGINIA'S COUNTRY

A SEPTEMBER afternoon in the Big Horn mountains! The air crystal clear; the sky cloudless; the outlines of the hills distinct! Elk Creek Valley lay golden in the sunshine, silent save for the incessant hum of locust and cricket, the hurrying of the creek waters, and the occasional bellowing of steers on the range beyond the foot-hills; deserted except for the distant cattle, a coyote stealing across the hills, a pheasant scurrying through the buck-brush by the creek, and some cotton-tail rabbits and prairie dogs, who, sure of safety, meant to enjoy the sunshine while they might.

The foot-hills more than half-encircled the Valley.

North, east, and south they tumbled, their brown, closely-cropped sides glowing here and there with the yellow of the quaking-asps, the red of hawthorn, and the bronze of service-berry. Above them rose the higher ranges, clothed in gray-green sagebrush and scant timber, and cut by canyon-forming mountain storms, invisible from the Valley; and far above all, seemingly near, but in reality miles away, the mountains extended their blue, snow-furrowed summits toward a bluer sky. Peak above peak they rose — some isolated and alone, others leaning upon the shoulders of the higher — all silent, majestic, mysterious, as though they held in their great hearts the secrets of the world — secrets of which Elk Creek Valley could never know. Yet the Valley looked very happy and content. Perhaps it had lain so long beneath their protection that it knew no fear.

The creek, rushing madly from the northern foothills, and fed by melting snow from the higher mountains, had cut a canyon for itself in its tumultuous journey from the hills; but as the land became more level, it slackened its pace, content to make but a slight depression through the Valley. Across it toward the west, beyond a great gap in the foothills, stretched an open plateau, which rose in undulations, and extended as far as one could see toward

other far distant mountains, on less clear days dim and hazy of outline, to-day almost as blue and distinct as the nearer ranges, though sixty miles away. This great sea of open prairie rolling westward was cut in as many pieces and bore as many colors as a patchwork quilt. Golden wheat-fields, the wheat shocked and piled in wigwams on the plain, met acres of black, freshly-plowed soil, which, in turn, bordered upon the tender green of alfalfa and of newly grown winter grain. Scattered over the prairie stretches, at intervals of a mile, perhaps of several, were homes — here, large ranch houses with out-lying buildings — there, the rough shack of a lone homesteader.

Yes, it was a golden land — smiling and peaceful in the September sunshine. Save for horses and cattle dotted here and there, the prairie seemed almost as deserted as Elk Creek Valley, though its homes promised inhabitants, and a blue line of distant smoke showed where the threshers were at work. Moreover, on the barely visible brown road that threaded its way across the prairie, two specks were moving rapidly in the direction of the Gap. The specks took form, became two riders, a boy and a girl, on wildly galloping horses, which, neck to neck, tore at last through the Gap, forded the creek

in a mad splash of water, stirrup-high, and dashed away up the Valley. Reaching the foot-hills a trifle in advance of his companion, the boy pulled in his restive horse, and called over his shoulder to the girl just behind.

"Are Pedro's feet all right, Virginia?"

"Yes, Don. Jim fixed them yesterday."

"Let's take the Mine then, shall we?"

"Yes, let's!"

And away they went, allowing the sure-footed horses to have their way up one of the foot-hills, called the "Mine," because some lone prospector, dreaming of a fortune, had dug from its side some poor coal; and then, perhaps discouraged, had abandoned the fruit of his labors, leaving the black heap as a monument to his zeal, and a testimony to the vanity of mere dreams.

They reached the hill-top almost at the same instant, their good steeds panting; they quite undisturbed, and, turning their horses' heads, drew rein and looked across the Valley. They were a robust-looking pair, red-cheeked and khaki-clad, and as good riders as Wyoming could produce. The boy was seventeen, or thereabouts, well-knit and tall for his years, with dark, heavy hair and clear, blue eyes that looked bluer through his coat of tan. His

"*FORDED THE CREEK IN A MAD SPLASH OF WATER.*"

features were cleanly-cut and strong, and his mouth had a laugh in the corners. A merry, honest, manly-looking lad — Donald Keith by name, and the son of a ranchman on the other side of the Valley.

She — Virginia Hunter — was a year younger, and for sixteen as tall and strong as he for seventeen. She was not pretty, but there was something singularly attractive about her clear, fresh skin, brown now, except for the red of her cheeks, her even white teeth, and her earnest gray eyes, at times merry, but often thoughtful, which looked so straight at you from under brows and lashes of black. Her golden-brown hair curled about her temples, but it was brushed back quite simply and braided down her back where it was well out of her way. A person riding could not bother about her hair. She sat her horse as though he were a part of her, holding her reins loosely in her brown left hand, her right hanging idly at her side. The wind blew back the loosened hair about her face, and the ends of the red handkerchief, knotted cow-boy fashion, under the collar of her khaki shirt. She, like the boy, seemed a part of the country — free, natural, wholesome — and she shared its charm.

They had been comrades for years — these two — for, in the ranch country, homes are often widely

separated, and the frequent society of many persons rare. Virginia's home lay up the Valley, beyond the first range of the foot-hills, while the Keith ranch was situated on the prairie, west beyond the Gap. Three miles apart across country, four by the road; but three or four miles in Wyoming are like so many squares in Boston, and the Keiths and Hunters considered themselves near neighbors. This afternoon Virginia had ridden over to say good-by to all the dear Keiths — Mr. David, Mother Mary, Donald's older brother Malcolm, and his younger, Kenneth, the farm-hands busy with the threshing, and the men in from the range to help with the wheat; for they were all her friends, and now that she was going so far away to school, they seemed nearer and dearer — indeed, next to her father and those upon their own ranch, the dearest of her world.

They had been quite as sad as she to say good-by. "The country won't be the same without you, my lass," Mr. David had said in his genial Scotch way; and Donald's mother, whom Virginia had called "Mother Mary," since the death of her own dear mother six years ago, had kissed her quite as though she were her own daughter. Even Malcolm had come in from the wheat field to shake her by the

hand and wish her good luck, and little Kenneth's feelings had been quite wounded because Virginia felt she must decline to carry one of his pet foxes away with her to boarding-school. Then Donald's father had granted the request in the boy's eyes that he might be excused from threshing to ride up the Valley and home with Virginia. So now their horses, good friends, too, stood side by side on the brow of the Mine, while their riders looked down the Valley, beyond the cottonwood-bordered creek, and across the wide, rolling prairie to the far away mountains; and then, turning in their saddles, to those ranges and peaks towering above them.

Virginia drew a long breath.

"We're like Moses on Mount Nebo, looking away into the Promised Land, aren't we, Don?" Then, as he laughed, "Do you suppose there's any country so lovely as ours? Is there anything in the East like this? Do you think I'll be homesick, Don?"

He laughed again, used to her questions.

"I suppose every fellow thinks his own State is the best, Virginia, but I don't believe there can be any lovelier than this. You know I told you about spending a vacation when I was at school last year with Jack Williams in the Berkshires. Some of those hills aren't higher than the Mine, you know,

and he called them mountains. It seemed like a mighty small country to me, but he thought there was no place like it. I wish he could get this sweep of country from here. No, the East isn't like this, — not a bit — and maybe you won't like it, but you're too plucky to be homesick, Virginia."

Little did Virginia realize how often those words would ring in her ears through the months that were to follow. She drew another long breath — almost a sigh this time.

"Oh, I wish you were going East again, Don, instead of to Colorado! 'Twould be such fun traveling together, and you could tell me all about the States as we went through them. But, instead, I'm going all alone, and Aunt Louise has warned me a dozen times about talking to strangers. Four days without talking, Don! I shall die! Is it very bad taste to talk to good, oldish-looking people, do you think?"

"*I* think your aunt's mighty particular, if you ask me," the boy said bluntly. "You'll have to talk to some one, Virginia. You'll never last four days without it, and I don't think it's any harm. But, you see, your aunt's from the East, and they're not so sociable as we are out here. I thought she was going East with you."

"No, she decided not to, and went to Los Angeles this morning; but I'm bursting with watch-words that she left. All the way to your house I said them over, and I nearly ran Pedro into a prairie dog's hole, I was thinking so hard. I. *It is very bad form to talk to strangers.* II. *Try to be as neat in appearance on the train as you are at home.* (Aunt Lou really means neater, Don.) III. *Don't forget to tip the waiter after each meal in the dining-car.* IV. *Be polite to your traveling companions, but not familiar.* That's all for the journey, but I've heaps more for Vermont and for school. Oh, why did you choose Colorado, Don?"

"Oh, I don't know, except that it's nearer home, and since I'm going there to college in another year, I may as well get used to it. The East is all right, Virginia, but some way I like it out here better. I'm a rank cow-boy, I guess. That's what they used to call me at school. Then, besides, the Colorado fellows ride a lot, and they don't in the East — that is, so much, you know," he added hastily, as he saw the dismay on her face.

"Don't ride, Don! Why, I can't stand it not to ride! Don't they have horses? Don't they — know how to ride?"

Her genuine distress disturbed him, and he hastened to reassure her as best he could.

"You'll find something to ride, I'm sure," he said. "Don't worry. Maybe the horses won't be like Pedro, but they'll do. You see, your school's in a larger town than mine. You'll write me all about it, won't you, Virginia?"

"Of course, I will — every little thing. If the boys thought you were a cow-boy, the girls will probably think I'm very queer, too."

"Oh, no, they won't! You're — you're different some way. And, anyway, they won't be as nice as you," he finished awkwardly.

Virginia, full of questions, did not heed the honest compliment.

"What are Eastern girls like, Don? Have you seen many? You see, I've never known one, except in books. Margaret Montfort certainly was different. Besides, you know what a time Peggy had when she went East to school, and she was only from Ohio."

Donald knew nothing of Margaret or Peggy, and felt incompetent to remark upon them; but he answered Virginia's questions.

"I used to see them last year at school," he said, "at the dances and at Commencement. And in the

Berkshires, I knew Jack's sister, Mary. She's great, Virginia. I hope there are some like her. She's at some school, but I forget where. Oh, I guess they're nice. You see, at parties, when they're all dressed up, you can't get real well-acquainted."

"Dressed up!" cried Virginia. "Don, you ought to see the clothes I've got! And trunks like closets — two of them! Aunt Lou bought my things in Chicago for father. He told her to get what I'd need, and when all the boxes came, he grew more and more surprised. He thought they had sent a lot for us to choose from; and when Aunt Lou told him it was only my 'necessary wardrobe,' he just sat down and laughed. Then I had to try them all on — six pairs of shoes, and sailor-suits, and coats and sweaters and dinner dresses, and goodness knows what all! It took the whole afternoon. That was the one last week, you know, when I didn't get to go hunting prairie chickens with you. And Aunt Lou made me walk back and forth in the dinner dresses until I could 'act natural,' she said." She paused laughing, and the boy looked at her, his face troubled.

"I hope all those things and going away off there won't make you different, Virginia," he said, a little wistfully.

"Of course, they won't!" she told him. "I couldn't be any different, Don. If it weren't for the fun of wondering about things, I'd never want to go even a little, but it will be new and interesting. Besides, you know Aunt Lou says it's 'imperative' that I go. I heard her say that to father one night this summer. 'It's imperative that Virginia go,' she said. 'She's getting really wild out here with just you men, and that woman in the kitchen.' 'That woman' means old Hannah, who's been so good to us ever since mother died!"

Donald looked angry for a moment. Apparently he did not care a great deal for Virginia's Aunt Louise.

"What did your father say?"

"He didn't say anything, like he doesn't when he's thinking or troubled; but, next morning, he told me he was going to send me East to mother's old school. He said he guessed I needed to see different things. Aunt Lou was there when he told me, and she said, 'It will be the making of you, Virginia,—a very broadening experience!'"

"I don't think I'd like your aunt very well," Donald announced bluntly.

Virginia was not surprised. "No, I'm sure you wouldn't, and I don't think she'd like you either.

That is, she *ought* to like you, and maybe she would, but she probably wouldn't approve. She's a person that doesn't often approve of things. She doesn't approve of my shooting, or of Jim teaching me to lasso the steers in the corral; and that afternoon when I wanted to go rabbit hunting with you instead of trying on dresses, I heard her tell father that I was getting to be rather too much of a young lady to ride the country over with you. But father laughed and laughed, and said he'd as soon have me with you as with himself."

Donald looked pleased. Then —

"I hope you won't get to be too much of a young lady while you're gone, Virginia," he said, "so you won't care for hunting and — and things like that, next summer."

"Don't worry," she said. "I won't be a young lady for years. I hate to even think of it! But we must go down, Don. The sun says five o'clock, and it's my last evening with father."

Her gray eyes, thoughtful and almost sad, swept the country before her.

"I hate to leave you all," she said softly, a little catch in her voice. "The valley and the creek and the cottonwoods and the prairie — all of you. And, most of all, the foot-hills. You know, Don," she

continued, turning toward him, "I think I like the foot-hills best. They're so sort of friendly, and they don't make you feel little like the mountains. You know what I mean!"

He nodded with quick understanding. They turned their horses to look at the peaks towering above them.

"Sometimes they really scare me," she said almost in a whisper. "They're so big, and look as though they knew so many things. Sometimes I wish they'd talk, and then I know if they did, I'd run and hide, I'd be so frightened at what they were going to say." Her eyes left the mountains and swept across the nearer hills. Suddenly she grasped his arm, all excitement. "Hst, Don!" she whispered, her eyes gleaming. "There! Behind that clump of pine on the range! Not a quarter of a mile away! Bess and the new colt! I know the way she holds her head. Wait a minute! There she is! She's seen us, and there she goes!"

With a wild snort, which they could hear distinctly in the clear air, and a mad kick of the heels, the horse tore away across the range, her colt trying manfully with his long ungainly legs to keep near his mother. Months on the range had transformed Bess from a corral pet to a wild steed, suspicious

even of her mistress, and mindful only of her safety and that of her colt.

"A nice colt," said Don, "and now she's down this far she won't go far away. Doesn't your father brand this week? They'll probably mark the little fellow with the rest."

"Yes, I suppose they will. That's one thing I can't bear to see — the branding. Father and Jim will be so glad to know about the colt. You can break it for me, Don, when it's two years old."

"All right, I'll not forget," he promised.

Then they turned again, and rode down the hill into the valley. This time they did not ford the creek, but turned north, following an old trail up the valley and through another gap in the hills a mile above. This brought them again to the open, where Virginia's home lay — a long, rambling house with its back against the foot-hills and its front looking westward across the prairie. Tall cottonwoods shaded the brown road that led to it; and down this road, beneath the trees, they rode, more slowly now.

A tall man, reading on the broad front porch, rose as they drew rein under the cottonwoods.

"Come in to supper, Don," he called cordially. "It's all ready, and we're glad to have you."

"Thank you, Mr. Hunter, but I can't. I've got

to be making for home. Good-by, Virginia," he said, jumping from his horse to shake hands with her, as she stood beside her father. " I'm going to be lonesome without you. Don't forget us, will you?"

" Good-by, Don." She had the same little catch in her voice as upon the hills, and her eyes were grave again. " I'll miss you, and, of course, I won't forget. And, Don," she called, as he swung himself into his saddle and galloped away, " remember, I'll not be a young lady when I come back!"

CHAPTER II

THE LAST NIGHT AT HOME

In the mountain country the twilights are longer and the sunset colors lovelier than anywhere else. Long after Virginia and her father, supper over, had come out upon the porch to sit together, the golden light lingered in the western sky, making more blue the far distant mountains, throwing the prairie into shadow, and casting upon the nearer eastern foot-hills a strange, almost violet glow. Slowly the gold changed to the deep, almost transparent blue of the mountain sky at night. The sunset light faded to give place to the stars, which, when the twilight was almost gone, seemed to shine out all at once, as if fearful of the sunset's lingering too long.

It was very still everywhere. Virginia sat in her favorite way — on a low stool by her father's chair, her head upon his knees, his hand in hers. Together they watched the light fade and the stars come out, as they had done for so many nights. No sound

anywhere, except Hannah's steps in the kitchen, an occasional distant laugh or song from the men in the bunk-house, and the night noises — the stirring of the cottonwoods and the singing of the insects.

For a long time neither of them spoke, and the realization coming closer every moment that this evening would be their last chance to talk together for many months, did not seem to make conversation easier. The big man in his chair was reviewing the years — thinking of the time, twenty-five years back, when he had first come to this country — then wild and unbroken like its own animals and roaming horses. He had come like countless other young men, seeking a new life, adventure, fortune; and he had stayed, having found an abundance of the first two, and enough of the last. In the darkness he saw the distant, widely separated lights of the homes on the prairie — that prairie which he as a young man had ridden across, then sagebrush-covered, the home of the antelope, the prairie dog, and the rattler; now, intersected with irrigation ditches, covered with wheat fields, dotted with homes. Yet the land possessed its old charm for him. It was still a big country. The mountains had not changed; the plains, though different in feature, stretched as

wide; the sky was as vast. He loved this land, so much that it had become a part of him; but his little daughter at his feet he was sending away that she might know another life.

He looked down at her. She was thinking, too — filled with a great desire to stay in her own dear, Western country, and with another as great to experience all the new things which this year was to bring her. Homesickness and anticipation were fighting hard. She looked up at her father, and even in the darkness saw the sadness in his face. Lost in her own thoughts, she had left him out — him, whose loneliness would be far greater than her own. She sprang up from her stool and into his lap, as she had always done before the years had made her such a big girl; and he held her close in his strong arms, while she cried softly against his shoulder.

"Daddy," she whispered, her voice breaking. "Daddy, dear, do you suppose people often want two different things so much that they can't tell which they want the most? Did you ever?"

He held her closer. "Yes, little girl. I expect many people do that very thing when it comes to deciding. And your dad is doing that very thing this minute. He thinks he wants to keep you right

here with him, but he knows away down deep that he wouldn't let you stay if he could. He knows he wants his little daughter to go away to her mother's school, and to have everything this big world can give her."

"But it's going to be so lonely for you, father. I'm so selfish, just thinking of me, and never of you. I can't leave you all alone!" And the tears came again.

Silently he smoothed her hair, until with a choking little laugh she raised her head.

"Don would call me a quitter, I guess," she said. "I'm homesick already, and he said to-day of course I'd be too plucky to be homesick." She laughed again. "I'm not going to cry another tear. And there are so many things I want to ask you. Father, tell me truly, do you like the folks in Vermont? Will I like them, do you think?"

She waited for what seemed to her long minutes before he answered her.

"Virginia," he said at last, "your mother's people are not like us away out here. They are of New England stock and know nothing of our life here, and it naturally seems rough to them. Your mother seemed to have a different strain in her, else she had never come to Wyoming, and stayed to marry a

ranchman like me. But they are your mother's people, and as such I honor and respect them. And I want you to like them, Virginia, for your mother's sake."

"I will, father," she whispered, clinging to him. "I promise I will!" A minute later she laughed again.

"I've written down all of Aunt Lou's warnings, and I'll learn them all on the train. Are grandmother and Aunt Nan like Aunt Lou, father?"

"I don't quite remember. Your grandmother is a lady, and looks it. Your Aunt Nan was but a little girl of your age when I saw her, but I think she's — well, a little less particular than your Aunt Lou, judging from her letters. I have been wrong," he continued after a pause, "in not sending you on to them in the summers, but I could not go, and it seemed a long way to have you go without me. And though we've always asked them, none of them has ever come here, until your Aunt Lou came this summer."

"Why didn't mother go oftener?"

He hesitated a moment. "Some way she didn't want to leave for so long. She loved this Big Horn country as much as you and I. We went together once before you came; and then the summer you

were five years old she took you and went again. But that was the last time. Do you remember it?"

"I remember the tall clock on the stairs. I held the pendulum one day and stopped it, and grandmother said it had not stopped for seventy-five years. Then she scolded me, and told mother I was a little wild thing — not a bit like my mother — and mother cried and said she wished we were back home with you."

They were silent again, listening to the wind in the cottonwoods. A long silence, then her father said quietly,

"Your grandmother was wrong. You are very like your mother. But I am sorry you had to look like your dad. It will disappoint them in Vermont."

Virginia's eyes in the darkness sparkled dangerously. She sat up very straight.

"If they don't like the way I look," she announced deliberately, "I'll go on to school, and not trouble them. I'm proud of looking like my father, and I shall tell them so!"

Her father watched her proudly. Back through the years he heard her mother's voice:

"If they don't like the man I've married, we'll come back to the mountains, and not torment them!"

A creaking sound, occurring regularly at inter-

vals of a few seconds, came from the road back of the house leading to the ranch buildings, and gradually grew more distinct.

"Jim's coming," said Virginia. "He isn't going on the round-up to-morrow, is he, father? Don't let him go, please!"

The creaking drew nearer, accompanied by hard, exhausted breathing.

"No," her father told her, his voice low. "I'm not going to let him go. He's too worn out and old for that work, though it's wonderful how he rides with that wooden leg; but I can't tell him he shan't take charge of the branding. He couldn't stand that disappointment. Come on, Jim," he called cheerily. "We're on the porch."

Virginia echoed her father. "Come and talk with us, Jim."

"I'm a-comin'," came from the corner of the porch, "fast as this old stick'll bring me. Ain't much the way I used to come, is it, sir? But stick or leg, I'm good for years yet. Lord, Miss Virginia, I'm a-goin' to teach your boys and girls how to throw the rope!" And talking as he wheezed and creaked, Jim reached the porch and laboriously stumped up the steps.

Jim was an old man, fifty of whose seventy years

had been spent on the ranges and ranches of the Great West. He had grown with the country, moving westward as the tide moved, from Iowa to Kansas and Nebraska, Nebraska to the Dakotas, and from the Dakotas to Montana and Wyoming. No phase of the life West had escaped Jim. He had fought Indians and cattle-thieves, punched cattle and homesteaded, prospected and mined. Twenty years before, seeking more adventure, he had made his way on horseback through the mountains to Arizona. Whether he found what he sought, he never told, but five years later, he appeared again in Wyoming, and since that time he had been with Mr. Hunter, whom he had known when the country was new. Had his education equaled his honesty and foresight, Mr. Hunter would long ago have made him foreman, for he had no man whom he so fully trusted; but Jim's limited knowledge of letters and figures prohibited that distinction, and he remained in one sense an ordinary ranch-hand, apparently content. Still, in another sense, there was something unique about his position. The younger men looked up to him, because of his wide experience and fund of practical knowledge; Mr. Hunter relied implicitly upon his honesty, and consulted him upon many matters of ranch management; and, next to

her father, there was no one in all Wyoming whom Virginia so loved.

Jim had taught her to ride when her short legs could hardly reach the stirrups; had told her the names of every tree, bush, and flower of the hills and plains; and had been her guard and companion on expeditions far and wide. As she grew older, he gave and taught her how to use her small rifle; and of late had even given her lessons in swinging the lasso in the corral, in which art he was dexterity itself. And last winter Virginia had been able to repay him,— though all through the years she had given him far more than she knew,— for in the autumn round-up, Jim, galloping over the range, had been thrown from his horse, when the animal stumbled into a prairie dog's hole, and the fall had broken his leg.

The chagrin of the old cow-puncher was more pitiable to witness than his pain, when the boys brought him in to the ranch. That he, the veteran of the range, should have behaved thus —" like the rankest tenderfoot "— was almost more than his proud spirit could withstand; and later, when the doctor said the leg below the knee must be sacrificed, the pain and loss, even the necessity of stumping about the rest of his days, seemed as nothing to him

compared with the shame he felt over his "tenderfoot foolishness."

The winter days would have been endless, indeed, had not Virginia been there to cheer him. Mr. Hunter would not hear of his staying in the bunkhouse, but brought him to the ranch,—and there, under Hannah's faithful nursing, and Virginia's companionship, the old man forgot a little of his chagrin and humiliation. Virginia read to him by the hour, nearly everything she had, and her books were many. Seventy is a strange age to receive a long-deferred education, but Jim profited by every chapter, even from "David Copperfield," who, he privately thought, was "a white-livered kind of fool"; and his patience in listening to David, Virginia rewarded by the convict scene in her own dear "Great Expectations," or by "Treasure Island," both of which he never tired.

Then, when he was able to sit up, even to stump about a little, Virginia, having reviewed the venture in her own mind, suggested bravely one day that he learn to read, for he barely knew his letters, so that while she was at school the hours might not drag so wearily for him. A little to her surprise, the old man assented eagerly, and took his first lesson that very hour. He learned rapidly, to write as well as

read, and now that his labors on the ranch were so impaired he had found it a blessing, indeed.

Of Jim's early life no one knew. He was always reticent concerning it, and no one safely tried to penetrate his reserve. His accent betokened Scotch ancestry, but his birth-place, his parents, and his name were alike a mystery. He was known to miles of country as "Jim." That was all. Enough, he said.

As he stood there in the open doorway, the light falling upon his bent figure, and bronzed, bearded face, Virginia realized with a quick pang of how much of her life Jim had been the center. She realized, too, how worn he looked, and how out of breath he was, and she sprang from her father's lap.

"Come in, Jim," she said, taking his hand in hers. "It's cold out here. Come, father."

They went into the big, low-storied living-room, where Hannah had lighted a fire in the great stone fire-place. The spruce logs were burning brightly, and Virginia drew her father's big arm-chair toward the fire.

"Sit here, Jim, where it's warm, and rest."

Jim about to sit down, hesitated. "You see, sir, I come up on an errand with a message from the boys. If it's all well and pleasin' to you both, they'd

like to beg permission to come up for a minute. You see, they're leavin' early in the mornin' for the round-up, and they want to wish Miss Virginia good luck. If they was to come, I wasn't to go back."

"Why, of course, they're to come!" cried Virginia, while her father nodded his approval. "I'd forgotten they go so early on the range, and I wouldn't go for the world without seeing them all. Sit down, Jim. Do! Will they be right up?"

Jim sank gratefully into the big chair, placed his broad-brimmed hat on his knee, and gave a final twist to his clean bandanna.

"They was a-sprucin' up when I left the bunkhouse, kind o' reckonin' on your sayin' to come along. Beats all how walkin' with a stick takes your wind." He was still breathing hard. Virginia watched him anxiously.

"Jim," said Mr. Hunter, after a pause, "I wish you'd look out for the place to-morrow. I've some matters in town to attend to after taking Virginia in for the train, and it may be late when I get back. A man from Willow Creek thought he'd be around this week to look at some sheep. I'm thinking of selling one hundred or so of that last year lot, and I'll leave the choice and price to your judgment."

"All right, sir." This helped matters considerably. Jim himself had decided that he could not go upon the range, but here was afforded a valid excuse to give the boys. His tired face brightened.

"And, Jim," continued Virginia, eagerly, "I almost forgot to tell you. Don and I spied Bess and the colt to-day on the lower range, not two miles from the corral. The colt's black like Bess, and a darling! Don't hurt it any more than you can help when you brand it, will you, Jim? Does it hurt much, do you suppose?"

"Sho' now, don't you worry, Miss Virginia. You see, brandin's like most other things that don't hurt nearly so much as you think they're goin' to. It ain't bad after a minute. I'll be careful of the little fellow. Here come the boys."

Five stalwart forms passed the window and came to the porch, cleaning their feet carefully upon the iron mud-scraper screwed to the side of the lowest step for that very purpose. Then, a little embarrassed, they filed up the steps and into the house, the two last bearing between them a large box which they placed near the door. They were hardy men, used to a rough life, of ages varying from young Dick Norton, who was eighteen and a newcomer, to John Weeks, the foreman, a man of fifty. Roughly

dressed though they were, in flannel shirts and knee-boots, they were clean, having, as Jim said, "spruced up" for the occasion. For a moment they stood ill at ease, sombreros in their hands, but only for a moment, for Mr. Hunter found them chairs, talking meanwhile of the round-up, and Virginia ran to the kitchen to ask Hannah for cider and gingerbread.

"Come in yourself, Hannah," she said to the kind soul, who sat by the spotless pine table, knitting busily; and she begged until Hannah changed her apron and joined the circle about the fire.

"Joe," said Virginia to a big man of thirty, whose feet worried him because they demanded so much room. "Joe, you'll keep an eye on the littlest pup, won't you? He has a lump in his throat, and the others pick on him. I wish you'd rub the lump with liniment; and don't forget to tell me how he is."

Joe promised. If the service had been for the Queen, he could not have been more honored.

"And, Alec," to a tall Scotchman, who had a wife and family in the nearest town, "I'm leaving my black Sampson and all his clothes to little David. You'll take them when you go in Saturday night?"

Alec beamed his thanks.

"I wish you'd use Pedro all you can, Dick." This to the young lad, who colored and smiled.

"He gets sore if he isn't used; and give him some sugar now and then for me. He'll miss me at first."

She turned toward the farthest corner of the room where a man sat apart from the others — a man with a kind, almost sad face, upon the features of which the town saloon had left its mark. This was William, one of the best cattle hands in the county when he could keep away from town. To every one but Virginia he was "Bill," but Virginia said he needed to be called William.

"William," she said, "if you kill any snakes, I wish you'd save me the rattles. I'm collecting them. And, if you have any time, I wish you'd plant some perennial things in the bed under my window, so they'll bloom early in June. You choose whatever you like. It'll be more fun not to know, and then see them all in blossom when I get home. Don't you think it would be a good plan?"

William's tired face, on which were written the records of many hopes and failures, grew so bright with interest that he did not look like "Bill" at all. Moreover, he loved flowers.

"Just the thing, Miss Virginia," he said. "I'll have it ready for you in June, and I won't forget them rattles, either."

She thanked him. "And oh, Mr. Weeks," she said, for she dignified the foreman by a title, "you won't let father work too hard, will you? Because I shall worry if you don't promise me."

So the delighted Mr. Weeks promised, while they all laughed. Then the men looked from one another to Jim with shy, embarrassed glances, as though they were waiting for something. Jim was equal to the occasion.

"You, Joe and Dick, bring that box in front of the fire while I get up."

Joe and Dick, glad of something to do, obeyed, lifting the big box before the fire, while Virginia stared in surprise, and her father smiled, watching her. Jim, scorning assistance, had risen from his chair and stood facing his audience, but his eyes were on Virginia.

"Miss Virginia," he began, while the boys fumbled with their hats, "none of us ain't forgot what you've been to us while you've been a-growin' up. Some of us have been here a good while, and some ain't been so long, but we've all been long enough to think a deal o' you. You've always treated us like gentlemen, and we ain't them that forget. This old ranch ain't goin' to seem the same without you, but we're glad you're goin' to be educated in that

"JIM, SCORNING ASSISTANCE, HAD RISEN FROM HIS C
AND STOOD FACING HIS AUDIENCE."

school your mother went to, for those of us who knowed her, knowed a lady.

"Now there ain't a better rider in all this country than yourself, Miss Virginia, and I can just see how you'll make them Easterners' eyes stick out. And we boys don't want you to have to ride on any o' them flat-seated English saddles, that ain't fit for any one but a tenderfoot. So we've just took the liberty of gettin' you a little remembrance of us. Joe and Dick, suppose you lift the cover, and show Miss Virginia her present."

Joe and Dick raised the cover of the box, and lifted from it before Virginia's shining eyes a new Western saddle. It was made from russet leather with trappings complete, and could not be surpassed in design and workmanship. On its brass-topped saddle-horn were engraved the letters "V. H."; the same monogram was embroidered on the four corners of the heavy brown saddle blanket; and the brass of the bridle, suspended from the saddle-horn, was cunningly engraved with the same design.

Virginia gazed at the saddle, at her father, at the men, one by one, at Hannah, who was wiping her eyes; and then suddenly the tears came into her own eyes, and her voice, when she tried to thank them, broke at every word.

"Oh, I — just — can't — thank — you —" she managed to say, while the men's rough faces twitched, and tears filled the furrows of Jim's cheeks, "but I'll — never forget you, never, because you're my very best friends!" And she went from one to the other, shaking hands with each, while her father followed her example, for he was quite as touched and delighted as she.

Then, after she had examined all over again every part of the saddle; after Jim had explained how they were to pack and ship it so that it would reach school by the time she arrived; after gingerbread and cider had helped them all to regain composure, Virginia went to her room and returned with a tiny box, and her fountain pen.

"Aunt Lou says that every girl who goes away to school must have calling cards," she explained, "and I'm going to use mine for the very first time to-night to write my address for each one of you. And every time you look at it, please remember how much I thank you every one, and how much I'm missing you."

So when the men went back to the bunk-house, after an hour they would always remember, each carried in the pocket of his flannel shirt a calling-card, given by a "lady" to a "gentleman."

"Oh, daddy," cried Virginia, as the last faint creak of Jim's stick died away on the road to the bunk-house. "Oh, daddy, why did they ever do it for me? And I've never done a thing for them, except perhaps reading to Jim!"

Her father gathered her in his lap for the last few minutes before the fire.

"Virginia," he said, "I learned long ago that we often help others most by just being ourselves. When you grow older, perhaps you'll understand what the men mean." They sat silently for a while, neither wanting to leave the fire and each other. From the bunk-house came the sound of voices singing some lusty song of the range. The boys apparently were happy, too. "And now, little girl, it's a long drive to-morrow, and we must be off early. Kiss your father, and run to bed."

Closely she clung to him, and kissed him again and again; but when the lump in her throat threatened to burst with bigness, she ran to her own room, leaving her father to watch the fire die away and to think of many things. Pinned to her pillow, she found a brown paper parcel, with "From Hannah" written in ungainly characters upon it. Inside were red mittens, knitted by the same rough fingers that had penned the words. The lump in Virginia's throat

swelled bigger. She ran across the hall to the little room where Hannah, muffled in flannel gown and night-cap, lay in bed, and kissed her gratefully.

"Run to bed, dearie," muttered the old servant. "It's cold these nights in the mountains."

But Virginia's mind was too full of thoughts for sleep. She reviewed her ride with Donald, her talk with her father, all the dear events of the evening with its crowning joy. It seemed hours when she heard her father go to his room, and yet she could not sleep. At last she sat up in bed, bundling the covers about her, for the air was cold, and looked out of her window. At night the mountains seemed nearer still, and more friendly — more protecting, less strange and secretive. She looked at them wondering. Did they really know all things? Were they millions of years old, as she had read? Did they care at all for people who looked at them, and wondered, and wanted to be like them?

"To-night I half believe you *do* care," she whispered. "Anyway, I'm not frightened of you at all. And oh, do take care of those I love till I come back again!"

Then she lay down again, and soon was fast asleep.

CHAPTER III

THE JOURNEY EAST

As the great Puget Sound Limited was about to pull out of the little Wyoming way-station to which Virginia and her father had driven in the early morning, a white-haired, soldierly looking gentleman in gray overcoat and traveling cap watched with amused interest a gray-eyed girl in a blue suit, who, leaning over the railing of the observation car, gave hurried and excited requests to her father who stood alone on the station platform.

"Father, dear," she begged, "don't work too hard or read too late at night; and don't forget to take the indigestion tablets. And, father, I think it would be fine if Jim could have my room when it gets cold. The bunk-house is bad for his rheumatism. And I do hope you can keep William away from town. You'll try hard, won't you?" The train slowly began to move, but she must say one thing more. "Daddy," she called, beckoning him

nearer, and making a trumpet of her hands; "daddy, you trust me, don't you, to use my judgment about talking on the journey?"

The man on the platform smiled and nodded. Then, taking his handkerchief from his pocket, he waved to his little daughter, who, waving her own, watched him until the now rapidly moving train quite hid his lonely figure from sight. Then she sighed, tucked her handkerchief in her coat pocket, and sat down beside the old gentleman, who was apparently still amused and interested, perhaps also touched.

"Well," he heard her say to herself with a little break in her voice, "it's all over and it's just begun." Then she settled herself back in her chair, while her neighbor wondered at this somewhat puzzling remark.

"How can it be all over and at the same time just begun, my dear?" he ventured to ask, his kind blue eyes studying her face.

Virginia looked at him. They two were quite alone on the platform. The old gentleman, having heard her last request of her father, concluded that she was using her judgment and deciding whether or not she had best talk to him. His conclusion was quite right. "He certainly is oldish, and very

kind looking," Virginia was thinking. "I guess it wouldn't be familiar."

"Why, you see, sir," she answered, having in her own mind satisfied herself and her father, and allowing herself to forget all about Aunt Lou, "it's all over because I've said good-by to father, and it's just begun — that is, the making of me is just begun — because I'm on my way East to school."

"So going East to school is going to be the making of you, is it?"

"That's what Aunt Lou says; and, besides, 'a very broadening experience.'"

"I see; and who is Aunt Lou?"

"She's my mother's sister from Vermont. You see, my mother lived in Vermont when she was a girl, and went to St. Helen's, too; but when she got older, she came to Wyoming to teach school and married my father. My mother is dead, sir," she finished softly.

His eyes grew kinder than ever. "I'm sorry for that," he said softly, too.

She thanked him. She had never seen a more kindly face. Certainly even Aunt Lou could plainly see he was a gentleman. Secretly she hoped he was going all the way East.

The train all at once seemed to be slowly stop-

ping. There was no station near. She went to the railing to look ahead, and the gentleman followed her. Apparently the engine had struck something, for a dark object was visible some yards distant by the track. They drew near it slowly, and as they passed, now again gathering speed, Virginia's quick eyes saw that it was a dead steer, and that on its shoulder was branded a horseshoe with a "C" in the center.

"My!" she cried excitedly, half to herself and half to her companion in the gray coat. "That's a Cunningham steer, strayed from the range. Even one steer will make old Mr. Cunningham cross for a week. He'll say there's rustlers around Elk Creek." She laughed.

"How did you know it belonged to Cunningham? Who is he, and what's a rustler?"

Virginia laughed again. "You're like me," she said frankly. "I ask questions all at once, too. Why, Mr. Cunningham is a ranchman who lives over the hills north of us; and I knew it belonged to him because I saw the brand. He brands his with a horseshoe mark, and a 'C' in the center. And a rustler is a horse and cattle thief. There used to be a lot of them, you know, who went about putting their own brands on young cattle and colts. But

there aren't any more now, you see, because the range isn't open like it used to be. There are too many people now. And, besides, no one would be likely to rustle cattle which are branded already. You see," she went on, " Mr. Cunningham's mean, though he's very rich, and he makes his men round up his cattle ever so many times even when they're not branding or shipping, so he can tell if a single one is missing. Every one laughs at him, because people in our country think it's very small to make such a fuss over one steer when you have hundreds."

" I should think so. And how many cattle have you? "

" Oh, not so many now as we used to have," she explained, while he listened interested. " You see, sir, the range isn't so open any more, because people are taking up the land from the government every year; and so there isn't so much room for the cattle. Besides, we've been irrigating the last few years and raising wheat, because by and by almost all the cattle land that's good for grain will be gone. The boys are rounding up our cattle to-day. I guess we have perhaps a thousand. Does that seem many to you? " she added, because the old gentleman looked so surprised.

Yes, it did seem a good number to him, he told

her, since he was accustomed to seeing five or six meek old cows in a New England pasture. Then he asked her more and more about her home and the land about, and, as she told him, she liked him more and more, and wished he were her grandfather. He, in turn, told her that he lived in Boston, but had been to Portland, Oregon, on a visit to his married daughter, and was now returning home. "Then he will go all the way," thought Virginia gladly. Also, after she had candidly told him that he looked like a soldier, he told her that he had been a Colonel in the Civil War, and ended by telling her that his name was Colonel Carver Standish. At that Virginia felt a longing to take from her bag one of her new cards and present it to him; but it would be silly, she concluded, since he had only told her his name, and so she said quite simply:

"And my name is Virginia Hunter," which pleased the old Colonel far better than a calling card would have done.

"And now, Miss Virginia," he said, "if you will pardon me for what looks like curiosity, will you tell me about Jim and William? I couldn't exactly help overhearing what you said to your father. I hope you'll excuse me?"

Virginia smiled. She did enjoy being treated

like a young lady. "Certainly," she said. And she told him all about poor old Jim, his wooden leg, the accident that necessitated it, his learning to read, which greatly interested the old Colonel, and his kindness to her ever since she was a little girl. Then, seeing that he really liked to know, she told him of the evening before, and the new saddle which the boys had given her.

"Capital!" cried the Colonel, slapping his knee in his excitement, quite to the amusement of a little boy, who had come out-of-doors and who sat with his mother on the other side of the platform. "Capital! Just what they should have done, too! They must be fine fellows. I'd like to know them."

"Oh, you would like them!" she told him. "I know you would! I love them all, but Jim the best. And this morning, Colonel Standish" (for if he called her by name she must return the courtesy), "this morning when the other men had all gone to the round-up, Jim harnessed the horses for father to drive me to the station. But he felt so bad to have me go away that he couldn't bear to bring the horses up to the door, so he tied them and called to father; and when we drove away and I looked back, he was leaning all alone against the bunk-house. And, some way, I think he was crying."

She looked up at the Colonel, her eyes filled with tears. The Colonel slapped his knee again, and blew his nose vigorously.

"I shouldn't wonder a bit if that's what he was doing, Miss Virginia," he said. "Fine old man! And what about William?" he asked after a few moments.

"Oh, William," said Virginia. "You'd like William; and I'm sure you wouldn't call him 'Bill' like some do. It makes *such* a difference to him! If you call him 'Bill' most of the time, he's just Bill, and it's a lot easier for him to stay around the saloon. But if you say 'William,' it makes it easier for him to keep away — he told me so one day. And in his spare time, he loves to take care of flowers, and plant vines and trees."

The Colonel liked William. Indeed, he liked him so thoroughly that he asked question after question concerning him; and then about Alec and Joe and Dick. It was amazing how the time flew! Another hour passed before either of them imagined it. The country was changing. Already it was becoming more open, less mountainous. Some peaks towered in the distance — blue and hazy and snow-covered.

"We can see those from home," Virginia told the

Colonel. "They're the highest in all the country round. They're the last landmark of home I'll see, I suppose," she finished wistfully, and was sorry when a bend of the road hid them from sight.

"You love the mountains?" he said, half-questioning.

"Oh, yes," she cried, "better than anything!" And then they talked of the mountains, and of how different they were at different times, like persons with joys and disappointments and ideals. How on some days they seemed silent and reserved and solemn, and on others sunny and joyous and almost friendly; and how at night one somehow felt better acquainted with them than in the day-time.

"But the foot-hills are always friendly," Virginia told him. "And they're really more like people, because you can get acquainted with them more easily. The mountains, after all, seem more like God. Don't you think so?"

The Colonel did think so, most decidedly, now that he thought at all about it. He admitted to himself that perhaps in his long journeys across the mountains and through the foot-hills on his visits West, he had not thought much about them, especially as related to himself. He wished he had had this gray-eyed girl with him for she breathed the

very spirit of the country. It had been rare good fortune for him that by chance he was standing on the platform when she said "Good-by" to her father, else he had missed much. It was dinner time before either of them realized how quickly the morning had passed; and Virginia ran to wash her hands, after the Colonel had raised his cap with a soldierly bow, saying that he hoped to see her again in the afternoon.

He did see her again in the afternoon, for they discovered that their sections were in the same car, in fact, directly opposite; and again the next morning, until by the time they reached Omaha they were old friends. They talked more about the country, which, after leaving the mountains, was new to Virginia's interested eyes; and then about books; and after that about the war, the old soldier telling a most flattering listener story after story of his experiences.

The conductor, coming through the car with telegrams at Omaha, found them both so interested that he was obliged to call her name twice before her astonished ears rightly understood him.

"Aren't you Miss Virginia Hunter?" he asked amused.

"Yes, sir," she managed to say. "But it can't

be for *me,* is it? I never had a telegram in my life."

"It's for you," he said, more amused than ever, while the Colonel smiled, too, at her surprise, and left the yellow envelope in her lap.

"Whom can it be from?" she asked herself, puzzled. "The spell of having a real telegram is so nice that I almost hate to break it by finding out. But I guess I'd best."

She tore open the envelope, and drew out the slip inside. When she had read it, she gazed perplexed at the Colonel. She was half-troubled, half-amused, but at length she laughed.

"I'll read it to you, I think," she said, "because in a way it's about you." The Colonel in his turn looked amazed. "You see," she went on, "it's from my Aunt Lou, and she warned me about talking to strangers on the way. I suppose she thought I'd forget, and so she sent this." She again unfolded the telegram, and read to him:

"LOS ANGELES, CAL., Sept. 15.

"I hope you are remembering instructions, and having a pleasant journey.

"AUNT LOUISE."

"But I'm sure she would approve of you," she assured him; "and I've talked with almost no one else,

except the baby in the end of the car and his mother; and babies certainly would be exempt, don't you think? No one could help talking to a baby."

He agreed with her. "Aren't you going to send her a wire in return?" he asked.

"Why, I never thought of that. Could I? Is there time? What can I tell her?"

"Of course, you could, and there's plenty of time. Ten minutes yet. I'll get you a blank, and you can be thinking what you'll tell her."

While he was gone, Virginia studied her aunt's message, and decided upon her own. She was ready when he returned.

"Don't go away, Colonel Standish, please," she said, when he would have left her to complete her message. "I never sent a telegram before, and besides I want you to tell me if you think this is all right. I've said:

"'Delightful journey. No talking except with baby, mother, and oldish gentleman.'"

The Colonel slapped his knee, and laughed. "Capital!" he said. "Capital! You've got us all in." He laughed again, but stopped as he noted her puzzled expression. "Not satisfied, Miss Virginia?"

"Not quite," she admitted. "You see it doesn't sound exactly honest. I've said, 'No talking except—' Now that sounds as though I'd talked only occasionally with the three of you, and most of the time sat by myself, when really I've talked hours with you. I think I'll change the 'No talking,' and say, 'Have talked with baby, mother, and oldish gentleman.' I'd feel better about it." She paused, waiting his approval.

"If I'd feel better about it, Miss Virginia, I'd surely make the change," he said approvingly. "That queer thing inside of us that tells us how to make ourselves most comfortable, is a pretty safe guide to follow."

So she rewrote the message, while he waited, and while he went to attend to its dispatch, wondered how Aunt Lou would feel when she received it.

At Chicago, Miss Cobb, a friend of Aunt Louise, met her and took her across the city to the station from which she was to take the Eastern train; and though Virginia had said "Good-by" to the Colonel until they should again meet two hours later, it so happened that he was in the very bus which took them with others across the city. Virginia introduced him to Miss Cobb, and under her breath,

while the Colonel was looking out of the window, asked if Aunt Lou could possibly object to her talking with such an evident gentleman. Miss Cobb, who, perhaps, fortunately for herself, was not quite so particular as Virginia's aunt, felt very sure there could not be the slightest objection, of which she was more than ever convinced after a half hour's talk with the gentleman in question.

So Virginia with a clear conscience continued her journey from Chicago on, and enjoyed the Colonel more than ever. As they went through the Berkshires on the last day of the journey, she told him more about Donald, his experience at school, and how he couldn't seem to feel at home.

"I wish my grandson knew that fellow," said the old gentleman. "Just what he needs. Too much fol-de-rol in bringing up boys now-a-days, Miss Virginia. The world's made too easy for them, altogether too easy!" And he slapped his knee vigorously to emphasize his remark. "By the way, what's the name of that school of yours?"

"St. Helen's at Hillcrest, sir."

"Exactly. Just what I thought you told me the first day I saw you. If I'm not mistaken, that's in the neighborhood of the very school that grandson of mine attends. And if you'll allow me, Miss Vir-

ginia, some day when I'm there I'm going to bring that boy of mine over to see you. You'd do him good; and I want him to see a girl who thinks of something besides furbelows."

Virginia smiled, pleased at the thought of seeing the Colonel again.

"I'd love to have you come to see me," she said, "and bring him, too, if he'd like to come. What is his name, and how old is he?"

"Why, he has my name, the third one of the family, Carver Standish, and he's just turned seventeen. He has two more years at school, and then he goes up to Williams where his father and I were educated. He's a good lad, Miss Virginia, if they don't spoil him with too much attention and too much society. I tell you these boys of to-day get too much attention and too few hard knocks. I want this fellow to be a man. He's the only grandson I've got."

So they talked while the train bore them nearer and nearer Springfield where Virginia's grandmother and aunt were to meet her. At last there were but a few minutes left, and she ran to wash and brush her hair, so that she might carry out the first of Aunt Lou's instructions: "Be sure you are tidy when you meet your grandmother."

She was very "tidy," at least so the Colonel thought, when, with freshly brushed suit and hat, new gloves and little silk umbrella, she stood with beating heart and wide-open, half-frightened eyes on the platform of the slowly moving train. The Colonel was behind her with her bag.

"You see," she told him, a little tremulously, "I'm so anxious for them to approve of me."

"Well, if they don't —" he ejaculated almost angry, and perhaps it was just as well that the train stopped that moment.

Virginia's eyes were searching the faces about her for those who might be her grandmother and aunt; and, at the same time, farther up the platform, the eyes of a stately, white-haired lady in black and of a fresh-faced younger woman in blue were searching for a certain little girl whom they had not seen for years.

"There she is, mother," cried the younger woman at last, quickening her steps,—"there in the blue suit. She walks with her head high just as Mary did."

Tears came into the eyes of the white-haired lady. "But there's a gentleman with her, Nan. Who can he be?"

"Oh, probably just some one she's met. If she's

like her mother, she'd be sure to meet some one."

She hurried forward, and so sure was she that the girl in the blue suit was Virginia, that she put both arms around her, and kissed her at once without saying a word.

"Oh, Aunt Nan," breathed Virginia, her heart beating less fast. She knew that moment that she should love Aunt Nan. But her heart beat fast again, as Aunt Nan drew her forward to meet her grandmother, who was drawing near more slowly.

"And this is Virginia," said that lady, extending her perfectly gloved hand, and kissing Virginia's cheek. "I am glad to see you, my dear. Mary's little girl!" she murmured to herself, and at that tears came again to her eyes.

Virginia liked her for the tears, but could somehow find nothing to say in response to her grandmother's greeting. She stood embarrassed; and then all at once she remembered the Colonel. He stood, hat in hand, with her bag — a soldierly, dignified figure, who must impress her grandmother.

"I — I beg your pardon, grandmother," she stammered. "This is my friend, Colonel Standish, who has been kind to me on the way."

Her grandmother acknowledged the introduction, her Aunt Nan also. The Colonel shook hands with

Virginia, and reiterated his intention to call upon her at school. "With your permission, my dear madam," he added, by his cultured manner quite convincing Mrs. Webster that he was a gentleman. Then he hurried aboard his train, and left a gray-eyed girl with a heart beating tumultuously inside a blue suit to go on a waiting northbound train toward Vermont. As his train pulled out from the station, the Colonel completed his sentence.

"If they don't approve of that little girl," he said to himself, with an emphatic slap upon his knee; "if they don't approve of her, then they're — they're hopeless, as that grandson of mine says, and I shouldn't care to make their acquaintance further."

Meanwhile Virginia was fixedly gazing out of the window, as the train, leaving Springfield, carried them northward. She tried to be interested in the strange, new country about her; but some way, instead of the crimson maples and yellow goldenrod, there would come before her eyes a cottonwood bordered creek, a gap between brown foothills, a stretch of rolling prairie land, black and green and gold, and in the distance the hazy, snow-covered summits of far away mountains. But with the picture came again Donald's words — words

that made her swallow the lump in her throat, and smile at her grandmother and Aunt Nan.

"No, the East isn't like this — not a bit, and maybe you won't like it; but you're too plucky to be homesick, Virginia!"

CHAPTER IV

VERMONT AS VIRGINIA SAW IT

It was not until the afternoon of the second day in Vermont that Virginia wrote her father. The evening before she had said "Good-night" as early as she thought polite to her grandmother, Aunt Nan, and the minister who had come to call, and, upon being asked, willingly stayed to tea, and had gone up-stairs to the room which had been her mother's to write her father about everything. But somehow the words would not come, though she sat for an hour at the quaint little mahogany desk and tried to write; and it all ended by her going to bed, holding close her mother's old copy of "Scottish Chiefs," which Aunt Nan had placed in her room, and forgetting in sleep the thoughts that would come in spite of her.

But now that the hardest first night was over, and the first forenoon, which she had spent walking with Aunt Nan, had gone, she must write him all about it. She sat down again at the quaint little desk,

over which hung the picture of a girl of sixteen with clear, frank eyes, and began:

"WEBSTER, VERMONT, Sept. 18, 19—

"FATHER DEAREST:

"Do you remember how the poor queen in the fairy tale dreaded to meet the dwarf because she knew she didn't know his name? Well, that was just like me when the train was near Springfield. If it hadn't been for the dear Colonel, whom I told you about in my train letter, I don't believe I could ever have been as calm as I truly *outwardly* was; because, daddy, I felt as though I didn't know grandmother at all, any more than the poor queen, and I *did* dread seeing her. But I *was* tidy, and my heart *didn't* beat on the outside, for which blessings I could well be thankful. The Colonel carried my bag for me, and that made it easier, for, of course, family pride forbade my allowing him to see that my grandmother and I weren't really well acquainted.

"And, after all, it wasn't so bad. Aunt Nan is dear, father, like mother, I know, and I love her already. She is not so *proper* as grandmother. *I* kissed Aunt Nan, and *grandmother* kissed me. That explains the way they made me feel. Grand-

mother *is* handsome, isn't she? And stately, like an old portrait. But when you talk with her you feel as though there were some one else inside your skin.

"I do hope they don't disapprove of me *now,* and will by and by care for me for mother's sake and yours. Aunt Nan likes me now, I am sure, and grandmother, I am reasonably sure, doesn't dislike me, though I think she considers me somewhat puzzling. She looks at me sometimes like we used to look at the tame foxes, when we weren't sure what they were going to do next.

"Do you remember how the country looked coming from Springfield to Webster, when you came with mother? It was in September when you came, you said, and I remembered it. The creeks, which they call 'brooks' here, are lovely, though not so swift as ours, and the oaks and maples are a wonderful color in among the fir trees. I know you remember the goldenrod and asters, because mother always told about them. Didn't you miss the quaking-asps, father? I did the first thing, and asked grandmother about them,—if none grew in Vermont. She didn't know what I was talking about. She had no idea it was a tree, and thought I meant a bug, like that which killed poor Cleopatra. But

I missed them, and I think the fall is sadder without them, because they are always so merry. I missed the cottonwoods, too. Aunt Nan said there were a few of those in New England, but they called them Carolina poplars.

"The little villages in among the hills are pretty, aren't they? — so clean and white — but they don't seem to care about the rest of the world at all, it seems to me. Webster is like that, too, I think, though it is lovely. If you remember how it looked when you were here, then I don't need to describe it, for Aunt Nan says it hasn't changed any. When we reached here, and were driving up towards the house, grandmother asked me how I liked Webster, and I said it was beautiful, but it seemed very small. She couldn't understand me at all, and said she didn't see how it could seem small to me when we didn't live in a town at all in Wyoming. I was afraid I had been impolite, and I was just trying to explain that I meant it seemed shut in because you couldn't see the country all around like you could at home, when we stopped at the house, and saw a gentleman coming toward us with a black suit and a cane. Grandmother looked at Aunt Nan, and Aunt Nan at grandmother, and they both said at once, 'Dr. Baxter!'

"'We must invite him to tea,' said grandmother. 'It would never do not to!'

"'Nonsense!' said Aunt Nan. 'I don't see why.'

"Well, he came up to the carriage just as grandmother finished whispering, 'Our pastor, Virginia,' and handed grandmother out, and then Aunt Nan, and lastly me. I tried to be especially polite when grandmother introduced me, remembering how she had warned me that he was the minister; but somehow all I could think of was the parson in the 'Birds of Killingworth,' because, when I first saw him coming down the street, he was hitting the goldenrod with his cane, and some way I just know he preaches about the 'wrath of God,' too, just like the Killingworth parson. He did stay to tea, though I'm sure Aunt Nan didn't want him, and I, not being used to ministers, didn't want him either; but I put on one of my new dresses, as grandmother said, and tried to be an asset and not a liability. But, father, I know grandmother was troubled, and, in a way, displeased, because of the following incident:

"Dr. Baxter is bald and wears eye-glasses on a string, and the end of his nose quivers like a rabbit's, and he rubs his hands, which are rather plump,

together a great deal. Some way, father, you just feel as though he didn't care away down deep about you at all, but was just curious. I am sorry if I am wrong about him, but I can't help feeling that way. All through tea he talked about the Christianizing of Korea, and the increased sale of the Bible, and how terrible it was that China wasn't going to make Christianity the state religion. He didn't pay much attention to me, and I thought he had forgotten all about me, when all at once he looked at me across the table and said:

"'And to what church do you belong, Miss Virginia?'

"Poor grandmother looked so uncomfortable that I felt sorry for her, and after I had said, 'I don't belong to any, Dr. Baxter,' she tried to explain about our living on a 'large farm' (I don't believe grandmother thinks ranches are real *proper)* and not being near a church.

"Aunt Nan tried to change the subject, but Dr. Baxter just wouldn't have it changed, and after looking at me thoughtfully for a few moments, he said:

"'I wonder that our Home Mission Board does not send candidates to that needy field. Do you have no traveling preachers, Miss Virginia?'

"Grandmother looked so uneasy that I did try to say just the right thing, father, but I guess I made a mistake, because I told him that we did have traveling preachers sometimes, only we didn't feel that we needed just the kind of preaching they gave. His nose quivered more than ever, and grandmother tried to explain again only she didn't know how, and at last he said:

"'If the Word is not appreciated in Wyoming, it is elsewhere, thank God!'—just as though Wyoming were a wilderness where 'heathen in their blindness bow down to wood and stone.' Grandmother looked more mortified than ever, and the silence grew so heavy that you could hear it whirring in your ears. By and by we did leave the table, and then I excused myself to write to you, but I couldn't seem to write at all, I felt so troubled about mortifying poor grandmother. This morning I thought she would speak of it, but she didn't, and perhaps, if I make no more slips, she will forget about it. It is very difficult to be a constant credit to one's family, especially when it requires so much forethought.

"Grandmother feels very bad because she has no son to carry on the family name. When she and Aunt Nan and Aunt Lou die, she says 'the name

will vanish from this town where it has been looked up to for two hundred years.'

"It makes a great difference in Webster *how* one does things — even more than *what* one does. This morning, when Aunt Nan and I were going to walk, Aunt Nan said, 'I think we'll run in to see Mrs. Dexter, mother. She'll want to see Virginia.' And grandmother said, 'Not in the morning, Nan. It would never do!' So we have to go in the afternoon. I told Aunt Nan when we were walking that at home we called on our friends any time, and she said she wished she lived in Wyoming! *She* could 'belong' to us, father, but I'm afraid grandmother never could enjoy Jim and William and the others. She is too Websterized.

"Wasn't it thoughtful of Aunt Nan to put mother's old 'Scottish Chiefs' on my table? It has all her markings in it. Last night — but I won't tell you, because you will think I am homesick, and I'm not! Please tell Don.

"Do you remember the view of the Green Mountains from the window in mother's room? I can see them now as I write you. They are beautiful, but so dressed up with trees that they don't seem so friendly and honest as our little brown foot-hills. Oh, daddy, I do miss the mountains so, and our

great big country! Last night when I tried to write you and couldn't, I stood by the window and watched the moon come up over the hills; and I couldn't think of anything but a poem that kept running through my head like this:

> 'To gaze on the mountains with those you love
> Inspires you to do right;
> But the hills of Vermont without those you love
> Are but a sorry sight!'

"Aunt Nan is waiting for me down-stairs. I can hear her and grandmother talking together. Oh, I wonder if they do approve of me!

"Father, dear, give my love to Jim and Hannah and Mr. Weeks and Alec and William and Joe and Dick and all the Keiths, and tell them I think of them every day. Give Pedro sugar as often as you remember, won't you?—and if the lump in the littlest collie's throat doesn't go away soon, please kill him, because I don't want him to suffer.

"I do love you so much, father dearest, that if I tell you any more about it, I'll quite break my promise to myself.

"VIRGINIA.

"P. S. Just think, daddy, Aunt Nan says you must come East in June to get me and visit them. She said also when we were walking that you were

a fine-looking man; and I told her that you were not only that, but that you were fine all the way through, and that every one in Sheridan County knew it! "V. W. H."

And while Virginia wrote her letter to her father in the room which had been her mother's, downstairs, in the library, her grandmother and Aunt Nan talked together.

"I must admit, Nan, she isn't nearly so wild as I expected after having been brought up in that wilderness."

"Wild, mother? She's a dear, that's what she is! And Wyoming isn't a wilderness. You must remember the country has grown."

"I know, but it can hardly afford the advantages of New England. I mean in a cultural way, my dear."

Aunt Nan actually sniffed. "Maybe not, mother. I'm sick of culture! I like something more genuine. And as to good manners, I'm sure Virginia has them."

"Yes," her mother assented. "And I must say I'm surprised after what Louise wrote as to the ranch life. Mary's husband has done well by Virginia, I must grant that."

"Lou is too particular for any use, mother. I've always said so. And as for Virginia's father, you've never half appreciated him!"

Virginia's grandmother felt rebuked — perhaps, a little justly.

"Of course," she said, a little deprecatingly, "there are crudities. Now as to that matter last evening with Dr. Baxter. I fear he was rather —"

"Shocked!" finished Aunt Nan. "And I'm glad he was! Virginia only told the truth. If he knew more about Wyoming geography and less about Korean idolatry, he'd appear to better advantage! He needs shocking!"

"My dear Nan!" interposed her mother.

"Well, he does, mother, and I hope he's so shocked that he won't come to tea again for a month!"

And with that Aunt Nan, leaving her mother somewhat disturbed in mind, went to call her niece.

CHAPTER V

THE "BROADENING EXPERIENCE" BEGINS

"I'M afraid it will look as though we didn't show proper interest, Nan. Besides, I never did like the idea of a child starting out alone for boarding-school. None of my children ever did. But what can we do?" It was Virginia's grandmother who spoke.

"Now, mother dear, don't worry about 'proper interest.' I've written Miss King all about it, so that she understands. And since I was careless enough to sprain my ankle, and you unfortunate enough to have to entertain the Mission Circle, we can't do anything but let Virginia go alone." This from Aunt Nan, who lay on the couch with a bandaged ankle, the result of a bad wrench the day before.

Virginia spoke next. "Don't worry at all, please, grandmother. It isn't as though I hadn't traveled way from Wyoming. I'll be very careful — truly,

I will — and try to do everything just as you would wish."

"Oh, I don't suppose it's absolutely necessary that one of us go. It's just that I have always considered it very essential that a young and inexperienced girl should be accompanied by some member of her family when she enters upon such an important step. But circumstances certainly dictate the course of events, and it looks as though you must go alone, Virginia. Miss King remembers your mother, and will welcome you for her sake; and she assures me you are to room with a wholly desirable girl of excellent family. My dear, you will try, I know, to be a credit to the Websters!"

Away back in Virginia's eyes gleamed a flash of light, but she answered quietly:

"Certainly, grandmother, and to the Hunters, too, because father is just as anxious that I should do well as you and Aunt Nan and Aunt Lou. Please don't forget how anxious he is," she finished, a little wistfully.

Aunt Nan gave her hand a friendly little squeeze. "Of course, he's the most interested of us all," she said. "We mustn't be selfish, mother. They'll send the carriage to meet you, Virginia, and Miss King will understand about everything. It will

seem strange at first, but you'll soon get acquainted, and love it, I know you will."

So it happened that on account of a sprained ankle and the Mission Circle, Virginia again boarded the train after five days in Vermont, and started with a heart filled with dreams and hopes to discover whether school were really as dear and delightful as Peggy Montfort had found it.

Hillcrest was a five hours' journey from Webster, and to-day Virginia could look at the countrysides which they passed with a less perturbed spirit than that with which she had so unsuccessfully tried to watch them nearly a week before. The visit in Vermont was over, and after all it had not been so hard. She really loved dear, frank, funny Aunt Nan very dearly, and she somehow felt sure that Aunt Nan loved her. As for Grandmother Webster, perhaps she did not love her Wyoming granddaughter just yet; but, Virginia assured herself, remembering her grandmother's warm kiss at parting, she at least did not entirely disapprove of her. After all, it was hard to have one's only granddaughter from Wyoming — especially hard when one could not understand that Wyoming was not a wilderness.

But as she reviewed the five days, she could not find any glaring improprieties or mistakes, except

perhaps shocking poor Dr. Baxter. But even then, she had only told the truth. After all, manners are quite the same in Wyoming as in Vermont, she thought. To be sure her *a's* were hardly broad to suit Grandmother Webster, and her *r's* quite too prominent. In Vermont there were no *r's* — that is, where they belonged. If used at all, they were hinged in the funniest sort of way to the ends of words. Virginia laughed as she remembered how grandmother had called her "Virginiar" and the maid "Emmar," but pronounced Webster, which possessed a real *r* at the end "Websta." She wondered if the girls at St. Helen's would all speak like that. If so, they would find her funny, indeed; but she did not mind.

New England was lovely. She did not wonder that her mother had always talked so much of its fir-covered hills, its rocky, sunny pastures, its little white-churched villages nestling in the hollows, its crimson maples, its goldenrod and asters. And this very journey to St. Helen's, which she was now taking, her own mother years before had taken many, many times in going back and forth to school before and after vacations. Quick tears filled her eyes as she remembered. Her mother would be glad if she knew her little daughter was on her way to her

mother's old school. Perhaps she did know after all. And with this thought came a resolve to be an honor and a credit to them all.

At one of the larger stations where the train stopped longer than usual was gathered on the platform a merry group of persons, saying good-by to two girls, who were apparently going to take the train. Perhaps they also were going to St. Helen's, thought Virginia, and she studied the group as closely as politeness would allow.

"Now, Priscilla, do be careful, and don't get into any more scrapes this year," she heard a sweet-voiced, motherly-looking woman say, as she kissed one of the girls good-by.

"Mother dear, I'm going to be the model of the school, wait and see," the girl cried, laughing. "Dorothy is, too, aren't you, Dot?"

"Of course, I am, Mrs. Winthrop. Dad's going to cut down my allowance if I don't get all A's. Oh, Mrs. Winthrop, I've had such a heavenly time! Thank you so much for everything."

"You must come again," said a tall gentleman in white flannels, evidently Priscilla's father, as he shook hands, while his invitation was echoed heartily by two jolly-looking boys — one of about Donald's age, though not nearly so nice-looking, Virginia

thought, and the other younger. The train gave a warning whistle.

"Priscilla, are you sure you haven't forgotten something?"

"First time in her life if she hasn't!"

"Have you your ticket and purse, daughter?"

"And did you put your rubbers in your suit-case?"

"Yes, mother, yes, daddy, I've got everything. Come on, Dot. The conductor's purple with rage at us! Good-by."

They hurried on board the train, and into the car in which Virginia sat. Then the one they had called Priscilla apparently remembered something, for she flew to the platform. Already the train was moving, but she frantically shouted to her mother:

"Oh, mother, my 'Thought Book' is under my pillow! I'd die without it! Send it right away, please, and don't read a word on pain of death!"

The younger boy on the station platform executed a kind of improvised war-dance as he heard the words, meaning apparently to convey to his troubled sister his intention of reading as soon as possible her recorded thoughts. Priscilla returned to the car and took her seat, directly opposite the interested Virginia.

"If Alden Winthrop reads that 'Thought Book,' Dot, I'll never speak to him again. 'Twould be just like him to make a bee line for my room, and capture it, and then repeat my thoughts for years afterward!"

"That's just the trouble with keeping a diary. I never do. My cousin would be sure to find it. Besides, half the time I'm ashamed of my thoughts after I write them down."

Virginia, sitting opposite, could not resist stealing shy and hurried glances at the two girls, because she felt sure that they also were bound for St. Helen's. She liked them both, she told herself. They were apparently about the same age — probably sixteen or thereabouts. The one who had been so solicitous about the "Thought Book," and whom they had called Priscilla, had brown eyes and unruly brown hair, which would fall about her face. She was very much tanned, wore a blue suit, and little white felt hat, and looked merry, Virginia thought, though she could hardly be called pretty. The other, whose name evidently was Dorothy, was very pretty. Virginia thought she had never seen a prettier girl. Her complexion was very fair, her eyes a deep, lovely blue, her hair golden and fluffy about her face, her features even, and her teeth perfect. She was

dressed in dark green, and to Virginia's admiring eyes looked just like an apple-blossom. Undeniably, she was lovely; but, as Virginia shyly studied the two faces, she found herself liking Priscilla's the better. The other some way did not look so contented, so frank, or so merry. Still, Virginia liked Dorothy — Dorothy what? — she wondered.

As they continued talking, she became convinced that they were going to St. Helen's, that they had been there a year already, and that Dorothy had been visiting Priscilla for a month before school opened. She longed to speak to them, but, remembering what Donald had said about Easterners not being so sociable with strangers, she checked the impulse, not knowing how they would regard it, and not wishing to intrude. Still, she could not resist listening to the conversation, which she could hardly have helped hearing, had she wished not to do so.

"Dear me! I wish now we hadn't been so silly, Dorothy, and done all those crazy things. Then we could have roomed together this year."

"I know. Maybe 'twas foolish, but I'll never forget them. Especially the time when we dropped the pumpkin pie before Miss Green's door." They both laughed. "And, anyway, Priscilla, with Greenie in The Hermitage, if we'd been saints, we

couldn't have roomed together. She thinks we're both heathen, and I worse than you; and just because she does think I'm so bad, I feel like being just as bad as I can be. I wish Miss Wallace would have the cottage alone this year. She's such a darling! I just adore her! I'd scrub floors for her! My dear, she wrote me the most *divine* letter this summer! It absolutely thrilled me, and I was good for a week afterward!"

Virginia looked out of the window amused. What queer ways of saying things! She had never heard a letter called "divine" before; nor had she realized that scrubbing floors and adoring some one were harmonious occupations. She listened again. Priscilla was talking this time.

"I adore Miss Wallace, too," she said. "She makes you want to be fine just by never talking about it. I wish I could like poor Miss Green — she seems so sort of left out some way — but she just goes at you the wrong way. Mother and daddy think she must be splendid because she enforces rules, and they say we're prejudiced; but I don't think they understand. It isn't enforcing the rules; it's the way she has of doing it."

Dorothy acquiesced. "I suppose we'll have to make the best of her if she's there. Miss Wallace's

being there, too, will make it better. I'm wondering whom I'll draw for a room-mate. Do you know who's yours?"

"No, Miss King wrote mother and said she'd selected a wholly desirable one for me. I do hope she doesn't chew gum, or want fish-nets up, or like to borrow."

Virginia recalled Miss King's words to her grandmother—"a wholly desirable girl"—but then that was just a form of expression. There was no reason to believe, much as she would like to hope, that Priscilla was to be her room-mate. At all events, if such a thing by any possibility should come to pass, she was glad she did not chew gum. As to fish-nets, she had never heard of one in a room, and as for borrowing, she had never had any one in her life from whom she might borrow.

At that moment she saw the girls looking at her. Perhaps they had suspected that she, too, was a St. Helen's girl. They whispered one to the other and exchanged glances, while Virginia, a little embarrassed, looked out of the window. She only hoped they liked her half as much as she liked them. They began to talk again.

"My dear," this from the extravagant Dorothy, "when you see my Navajo rug, your eyes will leave

your head for a week! It's positively heavenly! Daddy had it sent from California. Whoever my room-mate is, she ought to be grateful for having that on the floor. It makes up for me."

"I won't hope for a Navajo just so long as I get some one I'll like."

Virginia thought of her two Navajos in her trunk — one a gift from her father, the other made and given her by a New Mexican Indian, whom she had known from her babyhood. Oh, if only Priscilla might be the one!

"Do you suppose Imogene and Vivian will be back?" Priscilla continued.

"Imogene wrote me she was coming." Somehow Virginia detected embarrassment in Dorothy's answer. Who was Imogene? she wondered. "You know, Priscilla, Imogene's lots of fun. Of course, she isn't like you or Mary Williams or Anne, but you can't help liking her all the same."

"I know she's fun, Dot, but I don't think her fun is a very good kind; and I don't like the way she influences Vivian. Vivian's a dear when Imogene's not around; but the minute they're together she follows Imogene's lead in everything."

Somehow Virginia knew she should not care for Imogene. But where before had she heard the name

Mary Williams? Just then they passed a tiny village surrounded by elm trees.

"There's Riverside now," cried the girls opposite, "and Hillcrest is the next."

They hurriedly gathered together their belongings, and put on their hats. Virginia did the same, and as they noticed her preparing to leave the train, Priscilla smiled, and Dorothy looked at her with interest. But there was little time for exchange of greetings, for the train was already stopping. As they went with their suit-cases toward the door, Virginia, following, heard Priscilla say,

"Probably Mary Williams will be at the station. Senior officers usually meet new girls."

Then it all came back to her. Mary Williams was Jack Williams' sister, the girl in the Berkshires whom Don had liked so much. Her heart beat fast with excitement. Could she be the very same Mary Williams?

A moment more and they were all on the platform; and while Virginia stood a little shyly by her suit-case, she saw running down the platform toward them a tall, golden-haired girl in a white sweater. Priscilla and Dorothy dropped their luggage, and ran to meet her.

"Oh, Mary, you darling!" they both cried at

once, and embraced her until the tall girl was quite smothered.

"I knew you'd be down. I just told Dorothy."

"How is every one?"

"Is Greenie in The Hermitage?"

"Is Miss Wallace back?"

"Where's Anne?"

"Oh, let me go, please, a minute!" begged the tall girl, looking at Virginia. "I came down to meet a new girl. She must have come with you on your train. Wait and see her."

"I told you she was coming to St. Helen's," Priscilla whispered to Dorothy, while the tall girl went up to Virginia.

"You're Virginia Hunter, aren't you?" they heard her say cordially, "from that wonderful Big Horn country I've heard so much about! Miss King couldn't come down to-day, and the teachers in our cottage were away, so she sent me. I'm Mary Williams." And she put out her hand, which Virginia grasped heartily.

"Oh," she cried, her eyes shining, "aren't you Jack Williams' sister, and don't you live in the Berkshires, and don't you know Donald Keith. He's my best friend. Oh, I do hope you're the one!"

Mary's first surprise had turned to pleasure. She

shook hands with Virginia again, and more heartily.

"Why, of course, I know Donald Keith! He's the most interesting boy I ever met in my life. Why, now I remember, of course! When Miss King told me your name I tried to think where I'd heard it before. Why, you're the girl Donald talked about so much, who could ride so wonderfully and shoot and lasso cattle and kill rattle-snakes!"

Virginia blushed, a little embarrassed. She did not know how such accomplishments would be regarded by Eastern girls. Mary apparently admired them; but Virginia was not so sure of Priscilla and Dorothy. They stood a little apart and listened, certainly with interest, but whether with approval Virginia was not sure. However, she had little time for wondering, for Mary drew her forward to where they stood.

"Isn't it wonderful to have a girl way from Wyoming?" she said. "And isn't it lovely that I know all about her? Her best friend is my brother's best friend, too. This is Virginia Hunter, and these are Priscilla Winthrop and Dorothy Richards. Why, I almost forgot! You and Priscilla are room-mates. Miss King just told me."

So the longed-for joy was to become a reality! Virginia was radiant. She wondered if Priscilla

were really glad. The handshake with which she greeted her was surely cordial. Mary and Dorothy walked on ahead toward the waiting carriage, and left the new room-mates to follow.

"It's ever so interesting to room with a girl way from Wyoming," Priscilla said sweetly. "You'll have to tell me all about it. I don't know a thing!"

"I will," said Virginia. Then she laughed. "And I really don't chew gum, or borrow things. And what is a fish-net?"

Priscilla laughed, too. "Oh, did you hear those silly things I said? Why, a fish-net is a hideous thing to put pictures in. I loathe them!"

"Besides, I have two Navajo rugs," Virginia continued. "I hope I wasn't rude! I couldn't help hearing, really, and I was so interested."

"You weren't rude at all, and I'm wild over Navajos. Dorothy will be plain peeved, because we have two in our room."

Virginia gathered from the tone that "plain peeved" must mean something akin to jealous. But she was so happy that she forgot all about Navajos.

"I'm so glad I'm going to room with you," she couldn't help saying. "I knew I'd like you the moment you got on the train, and I like you better every minute!"

Priscilla in her turn was embarrassed. She was not used to such frankness of speech, especially on first acquaintance. But very likely the manner of speaking in Wyoming, just as Virginia's speech, so full of *r's* was different from her own. And she was ready to go half-way at least.

"Why," she stammered, "I — I'm — sure I'm glad, and I — I — know I'll like you, too." Which was quite an admission for a member of the conservative Winthrop family to make to a stranger!

CHAPTER VI

ST. HELEN'S AND THE HERMITAGE

ST. HELEN'S lay a mile west of the station, and half a mile from the village itself, through whose quiet, elm-shaded streets they were soon driving in the big, open carriage. The girls pointed out to Virginia the places of especial interest — the little white church which they attended on Sundays; Mrs. Brown's cottage, where pumpkin pies and "heavenly chocolate cake" might be purchased, if not too frequently; and, chief of attractions, the "Forget-me-not," whose sundaes, once eaten, were never forgotten.

At the little post-office, another girl joined them, and was in turn embraced quite as rapturously by Priscilla and Dorothy as Mary had been. She was introduced to Virginia as Anne Hill, Mary's room-mate, and another Senior.

"The two sharks and faculty pets of St. Helen's," observed Dorothy, supplementing the introduction, and including Mary and Anne with a wave of her pretty hand.

Virginia had not the vaguest idea of what a shark might be. Most apparently, not a fish; but she saw that Dorothy's remark embarrassed both Mary and Anne. She liked Anne at once. She was rather short and plump, with a sweet face and soft Southern accent.

"She comes from Virginia," Priscilla said in a whisper to her new room-mate, as they drove along.

Virginia divided her attention between her great interest in the country and her absorbing eagerness to hear all that the girls had to say, for Mary and Anne were kept busy answering Priscilla's and Dorothy's questions. Yes, Imogene Meredith had returned, and she and Vivian Winters were rooming together as they did last year. Miss Green was to be in The Hermitage — (a long sigh from Priscilla and Dorothy) — but the adorable Miss Wallace was to be there likewise. The fortunate girl, who was to be blessed with Dorothy's Navajo rug, and, incidentally, with Dorothy herself, was new, and a protégée of Miss Wallace's. (Sighs of envy from all.) Her name was Lucile Du Bose, and Miss Wallace had become acquainted with her in France through mutual friends. She was doubtless very nice, but a little shy and apparently lonely, and Miss Wallace had asked as a special favor to herself that the girls

try to make her feel at home. Moreover, Miss Wallace had proposed Dorothy as a room-mate.

"That settles it," announced Dorothy. "I shall be angelic to Lucile, even if she's positively hopeless; since I'm doing Miss Wallace a favor!"

"Who has the big up-stairs room?" asked Priscilla.

Mary and Anne laughed. "Somebody very important," said Anne in her pretty Southern accent. "She hasn't come herself, but she has trunks and bags enough for the whole family, and they keep on coming. Up to this noon there were three trunks, two bags, a shawl strap, and four express packages. And the trunks and bags are all marked 'K. Van R.— New York' in big letters. Mary and I were so wild with curiosity that we had the impoliteness to turn over one of the express packages to see the name on it, and 'twas 'Miss Katrina Van Rensaelar.' We asked Miss Green about her, but gleaned no information except that she would be here in a few days, and was to room alone, as her guardian had especially requested it."

"Dear me! How select!" observed Dorothy.

"She ought to be Katrina Van Tassel, like Katrina in 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,'" said Virginia, whereupon every one laughed, and Mary said

that "Sleepy Hollow" would be a very appropriate name for the room, as the girls who had it last year never heard the rising bell, and were invariably late for breakfast.

"We're getting very near now, Virginia," said her new room-mate. And, a moment later, they drove through some stone gate-posts and up a lovely curving road bordered by pines, which edged the woodland on either side.

"There are always hepaticas here in the spring the first of any place," they told her.

Then they crossed a rustic bridge over a little brook, after which the pines gave way to maples and oaks, on either side of which were open fields and meadows. They snow-shoed here, they told her; and in the spring the ground was fairly blue with violets. Now the roadsides, as well as the land near the brook, were yellow with goldenrod and purple with asters, her mother's flowers. The road commenced to be more hilly above the meadow, and as the horses walked slowly along, Virginia noticed with interest the shrubs and trees which grew in tangled masses on either side. She knew the sumac, now in its autumn scarlet, and the birches; but there were many which she had never seen, and she missed the service-berry and the buck-

brush, which bordered the Wyoming roads, the cottonwoods and her own dear quaking-asps, which always seemed so merry and friendly in the fall. What a lovely place for a school, she kept thinking to herself, as they climbed the hill, and, suddenly leaving the wood road behind, came out upon an open campus, dotted here and there with fine old elms and maples.

"And this is St. Helen's," the girls told her, as they followed the elm-shaded driveway, while her delighted eyes wandered across the lawns to the gray stone buildings, upon which the ivy was already turning red.

"It's lovely," she said softly, "just as lovely as mother used to tell me. You see, years ago my mother came here to school, too."

Perhaps the softness of her voice told the girls more than she herself had done, for they were silent for a moment. Then Mary said,

"Miss King wanted me to bring Virginia over to the office as soon as she came, so you girls can go on to The Hermitage. You might as well leave your bag in the carriage, Virginia. They'll put it in your room."

Miss King's office was in the largest of the gray stone buildings, which, Mary told Virginia, held the

gymnasium, the big assembly hall, some recitation rooms, and the offices of the principal and other important personages.

"You'll love Miss King," Mary reassured her, perhaps guessing that Virginia felt a little shy. "You see, she doesn't teach any more, and she leaves most of the care of the girls to the younger teachers; but she always conducts chapel, and arranges with each girl separately about her studies. It's wonderful how she knows every girl in St. Helen's, and she's interested in every little thing that concerns us. We just love her!"

They went up the steps, and into a large, open hall, at the end of which a fire blazed in a big stone fire-place.

"We don't really need a fire now," Mary explained, "but Miss King says it seems more homelike and cheerful when the girls come in."

From the hall many doors led to different rooms, and through two big central ones they passed into a large office. A young woman at the desk rose to greet them.

"You're to take the young lady to Miss King's private office, Miss Williams," she said.

Mary thanked her, and crossing the room, rapped upon the door of an inner office. A sweet, cheery

voice said, "Come in," and they entered a large sunny room, by the western window of which sat a gray-haired lady, who rose with girlish eagerness to greet them.

"I have been waiting for you, my dears," she said, and Virginia thought she had never heard such a sweet voice. "And I have been waiting years for you, Virginia," she continued. "Come to the window. I want to look at my dear Mary Webster's little girl."

She took them by either hand, and drew them to the window. Then she took off Virginia's hat, and with tears in her sweet, almost sad blue eyes studied the girl's face.

"My dear," she said at last, "you don't look like your mother, and yet you do. Your eyes are gray, while hers were blue, but the light in them is just the same, and your mouth is hers. But it is only fair that you should look also like that fine father of yours whom your mother brought to see me eighteen years ago. It was twenty years ago that Mary Webster left St. Helen's the sadder for her leaving; and now the same St. Helen's is gladder for her coming again in her little daughter. Oh, my dear, my dear, how glad I am to have you here!"

With that her blue eyes quite brimmed over with tears, and she held Virginia close a moment and kissed her.

A lump rose in Virginia's throat and she could not speak. The dear memory of her mother, and more than all else, the genuine praise and appreciation of her father, the first she had heard since she came East, with the exception of Aunt Nan's compliment, quite overcame her. Tears filled her eyes, and her chin quivered, when she tried to thank Miss King. But the dear lady understood, and, still holding her hand, turned to talk with Mary until Virginia should be herself again.

"And, now," she said gayly, a few moments later, "you're both to have tea with me, for I've told Miss Weston I'm not to be interrupted on any condition. We don't have girls from Wyoming every day, do we, Mary? You like my room, Virginia?" For Virginia's eyes were wandering about the room, charmed with everything.

"I just love it, Miss King," she said, in her natural, unaffected way. "It makes me think of a sunny autumn afternoon at home. The walls are just the color of our brown foot-hills, and the yellow curtains against them are like the sunlight on the hills. And I love the marigolds on the table. I

always have them in mother's garden at home. She loved them so."

"I'm so glad it seems like that to you," Miss King told her, "because it always makes me think of October, my favorite month." And she looked about contentedly at the soft brown walls, the pale yellow silk curtains, the darker furniture, and the bowl of yellow and brown marigolds which saw their reflection in the polished table. The pictures were largely soft landscapes in sepia, Corot's and Millet's; but here and there was hung a water color in a sunny, golden frame.

"I wanted a restful room with soft colors, and soothing pictures — not profound, energy-inspiring ones — for in this room I rest and read and talk with my girls. And some way it satisfies me — the way I have furnished and arranged it. Now, Virginia, I want to know about that wonderful country of yours. You must tell us while we drink our tea."

Then followed one of the most memorable hours of Virginia's school life. Years afterward the remembrance of it was to stay with her — a sweet and helpful influence. They sat in the brown and gold room, which the sun setting made more golden, and talked of school plans, of the new girls, of the sum-

mer just passed, and most of all of Virginia's country, which neither Miss King nor Mary had seen. The subjects of their conversation were simple enough, but in some way the gray-haired woman by the window made everything said doubly memorable and precious; and when they left, as the school clock was striking five, they felt, as many before them had felt, strangely helped and strengthened.

"Isn't she wonderful?" breathed Virginia, as they went down the steps together.

"Yes, she is," Mary said thoughtfully. "And after I've been with her I wonder what it is about her that helps one so. She doesn't say very much — she always makes you talk; but there's just something beautiful about her that you always feel. I guess that's why St. Helen's is such a fine school."

They took the long way around the campus so that Virginia might see the buildings. In addition to the large main one, there were two others, also of gray stone — one for recitations and the other containing the laboratories and Domestic Science rooms. There was also, Mary told her, in the pine woods below the hill, a little gray stone chapel, called St. Helen's Retreat, where they held their vesper services, and where the girls were free to go when they wished. It was the quietest, dearest

place, Mary said. She did not see how she had happened to forget to show Virginia the woodsy path that led to it, as they came up the driveway. The cottages for the girls were scattered about the campus. There were six of them,— King Cottage, West, Overlook, Hathaway, Willow, and The Hermitage. Each accommodated fifteen girls, with the exception of The Hermitage, which was smaller than the others and held but nine. Miss King did not like dormitories, Mary explained, as they went along. She thought they lacked a home feeling, and so St. Helen's had never built dormitories for its girls. Moreover, in spite of many requests, Miss King limited her number of girls to eighty-five — a large enough family, she said, since she wished to know each member of it. The cottages did look homelike certainly, Virginia thought, with their wide porches, well-kept lawns, shrubs, and garden flowers. The Hermitage was the tiniest of them all, and stood quite apart from the others behind a clump of fir trees, through which a gravel path led to the cottage itself.

" Really, The Hermitage isn't a very appropriate name for a house full of girls," Mary said, as they drew nearer the little cottage; " but one of the older graduates gave the money for it and asked the priv-

ilege of naming it herself. So she selected that name on account of the location, forgetting that girls aren't a bit like hermits."

Virginia thought the name and location alike lovely; and as they passed through the fir trees and reached the porch which surrounded the house, her satisfaction was complete. Inside, The Hermitage was quite as attractive as its brown-shingled exterior. On the first floor were the living-room, with a wide stone fire-place and book-lined walls, the sunny, homelike dining-room, and the rooms of the two teachers. Up-stairs were the four rooms of the girls, each large and sunny, and opening upon a porch, and away up on the third floor was one large room, which was this year to be occupied by the mysterious Katrina Van Rensaelar.

All was hurry and bustle on the second floor of The Hermitage as Mary and Virginia went up the stairs. Five girls were frantically and unsystematically unpacking — pausing every other minute to go the rounds for the sake of exhibiting some new possession acquired during the summer. Two of the girls Virginia had not seen, and her new room-mate promptly introduced them.

"These are our next door neighbors, Virginia," she said, "Imogene Meredith and Vivian Winters.

And this is Virginia Hunter from the Big Horn Mountains in Wyoming."

"Indeed?" remarked the one called Imogene, raising her eyebrows and extending a rather languid hand. "Quite off the map, n'est-ce-pas?" and she laughed.

She was tall with dark, extremely-dressed hair, and eyes that did not meet your own. Her dress was of the latest fashion, and she wore several pieces of expensive jewelry. Virginia was embarrassed by her easy, uninterested manner, and her strange laugh. Vivian Winters she liked better. Vivian was short with a sweet, childish face, and wistful blue eyes. She, too, was dressed far too lavishly for school, Virginia felt, but she liked her all the same, and did not feel at all embarrassed in replying to her pleasant little welcome. As she looked at them, she recalled the conversation she had heard between Priscilla and Dorothy in the train, and she thought she understood Priscilla's feeling toward Imogene. But, perhaps, they were both mistaken, and she wouldn't begin by being prejudiced. Just then Dorothy called Imogene to her room at the other end of the hall, and Priscilla took Virginia to their own room.

"There's a huge box here for you," she said, as

they went down the hall. "It nearly fills the room."

"Oh, it's my saddle here already!" cried Virginia. "It *is* a huge box, isn't it?"

"Your — what?" asked the amazed Priscilla, and listened open-mouthed while Virginia explained, and told her about Jim and the others. So interested did she become that before they realized it, the supper-bell had rung, and found them sitting side by side on the big box, friends already.

"I never heard anything so interesting in all my life," exclaimed Priscilla, as they searched for hairbrushes and towels among their confused luggage. "And will you really teach me to ride?"

"Why, of course, I will. You'll love it! Oh, I'm sorry to be late the very first night!"

"That's the best time of all, because they expect it then. Besides, Miss Green's dining out, and Miss Wallace — you'll love her! — took Lucile Du Bose to town to see the oculist. Mary's in charge tonight, and she'll excuse us."

"Is Mary part teacher?" Virginia asked, puzzled.

No, not that exactly, Priscilla explained; but each year the girls of the different cottages elected one of their number who would be a Senior the next year to be a kind of cottage monitor, to take charge of the table and study hours when the teachers were out.

It was an honor to be elected, because it meant that the girls considered you trustworthy; and every one at St. Helen's knew and trusted Mary Williams.

Virginia admired Mary more than ever. It must be wonderful, she thought as she tied her hair-ribbon and searched for a clean handkerchief, to be trusted by every one in school. Could they say that of her when she became a Senior?

"What are you, Priscilla?" she asked as they went down-stairs.

"I'm a Junior," said Priscilla, "and so are Dorothy and Imogene. Anne is a Senior like Mary. Vivian's a Sophomore, and Lucile Du Bose, too, they say. As for Miss Van Rensaelar, no one knows. Maybe she's a post-grad. She sounds very grand."

That evening they finished unpacking, and by nine o'clock their room was quite settled. The Navajo rugs were on the floor — the envy of the house. The saddle-box they had covered, and with pillows it made quite a picturesque divan. Of course, the effect was lessened in the mind of any one who might attempt to sink down upon it, but it looked well, and there were chairs enough without it. Each cot was covered with afghan and pillows. Even the pictures were hung, and their few treas-

ured books, of which Virginia discovered to her joy Priscilla was as fond as she, were placed in the little wall book-case from Virginia's room at home. Altogether the big room had a cheery, homelike atmosphere, and they both felt very happy.

Before going to bed they visited their neighbors. Mary and Anne's room they found not unlike their own, only there were even more books about, and an adorable tea-table with brass kettle and little alcohol lamp, for Seniors were allowed to serve tea on Saturday afternoons. Dorothy's room was in a sad state of upheaval, the Navajo rug, carefully spread on the floor, being the only sign of an attempt at settlement. Dorothy herself was curled up on the couch, deep in a magazine. Her room-mate had not returned she said, so why arrange things? Their ideas might not harmonize.

The room opposite their own, occupied by Imogene and Vivian, was settled in a most unsettled manner. Virginia thought as she entered that never in her life had she seen so many things in one room. One entire wall was festooned with a dreaded fish-net, in which were caught literally hundreds of relatives, friends, and acquaintances; the other walls were covered with pennants. The couches were so piled with pillows that one could

not find room to sit down; the dressers were loaded with costly silver toilet articles, and more friends in silver frames; even the curtains were heavy with souvenirs, which were pinned to them. There were no books, except a few school-books, tucked under the desk, and no pictures, save highly decorated posters, wedged among the pennants, where a few inches of bare space had not been allowed to remain uncovered. It all gave Virginia a kind of stifled sensation, and she was glad to return to their own room when the nine-thirty bell had rung.

It was strange to crawl into her cot-bed opposite Priscilla; strange to talk in whispers for a few moments, and then to say "Good-night." For a few more moments she wondered with a wave of homesickness, more for her father than for herself, what they were all doing at home. Were they sleeping while the mountains kept their silent night watch? No, that could not be, for the time was different. Colonel Standish had explained that to her on the journey East. Dear Colonel Standish! What was that difference? Was it two hours earlier at Hillcrest? Then it would be only eight o'clock at home. Or was it —? But her tired head, so weary from the day's excitement, refused to reckon differences in time, and Virginia fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII

"PERTAINING ESPECIALLY TO DECORUM"

THE first two weeks of Virginia's life at St. Helen's passed without a cloud. The hours were as golden as the October days themselves. She and Priscilla liked each other better every day. She had already become acquainted with many of the girls at the other cottages, and she found them as jolly and merry as those at The Hermitage. She liked them — almost every one — and although at first her frank way of speaking, and the strangeness of her accent had puzzled and surprised them, they liked Virginia. Of course, all things accepted, they might have preferred being born in Massachusetts to Wyoming, for to many of them, as to Grandmother Webster, Wyoming seemed more or less of a wilderness, and a ranch rather a queer kind of home, but they had the good sense, and better manners, not to announce their preferences to Virginia; and as the days went by they liked her more and more. Wyoming might be a wilderness, they said

to themselves; but this ranch-bred girl certainly was as cultured as any girl at St. Helen's. So the letters which Virginia wrote almost daily to her father were very happy ones, and she almost began to doubt the possibility of being homesick in this beautiful place. Still, there were many weeks yet to come!

Her studies, with Miss King's help, had been pleasantly arranged; and, thanks to her book of compositions she had brought, her wide reading, and her year of Algebra in the country school, she found herself, to her great joy, ranked as a Sophomore, and in classes with Lucile and Vivian. She liked Vivian very much, and tried hard to like Imogene for Vivian's sake. As for Lucile, she found her interesting in a queer foreign kind of way, for Lucile's French father, and her years in Paris and Lausanne, had given her ways hardly American. Besides, Virginia agreed with Dorothy, she would like Lucile for Miss Wallace's sake alone; for Virginia, as the prophets had foretold, already loved Miss Wallace with unswerving loyalty.

Two more different persons than Miss Margaret Wallace and Miss Harriet Green would have been hard to find, especially housed beneath one roof, and presumably dedicated to the same ideals. Miss

Wallace was young, enthusiastic, and attractive in appearance and personality; Miss Green was middle-aged, languid, and unattractive, certainly in appearance, and, as far as one could judge, in personality. Both were scrupulously conscientious, but Miss Wallace enforced the rules because she loved the girls, and Miss Green because it was her duty. Moreover, Margaret Wallace, remembering her own recent college days, trusted the girls before she suspected them; whereas Miss Green reversed the proceedings, and watched them closely before she decided to trust. The result of these different methods may be imagined. The girls obeyed Miss Wallace, because she never expected them to do otherwise. If they obeyed Miss Green, it was done unwillingly to save trouble.

Be it said to Miss Green's credit that she was an excellent teacher. The colleges which the St. Helen's girls entered, expected and received girls whose training in Latin and Greek was unexcelled. She had been ten years at St. Helen's. Perhaps her superior teaching and her unshaken faithfulness to duty, more than offset her failure, which she herself did not perceive, as a disciplinarian. However that might be, the girls at St. Helen's did not love Miss Green.

Virginia, being a new-comer, resolved to like her; and to that end she really strove, being the one girl in The Hermitage and often the only one in school, who defended the teacher, whose strict adherence to her own interpretation of duty brought with it sad mishaps, often for the girls and sometimes for herself. Even Mary, who was Miss Green's helper, though she did not say much at the indignation meetings of the other girls, quite clearly did not like Miss Green.

"I think it's sweet of you, Virginia, to stand up for her," Priscilla announced one evening, as they wrestled with extra hard Latin lessons, "but your time hasn't come yet. I hope you'll always be able to like Greenie, but I have my doubts."

"Well, I'm going to try hard, anyway. Of course, I shan't love her — I don't hope for that — but she seems so left out with us all loving Miss Wallace so much, that I'm going to try."

"That's just what I thought when I came last year," observed the experienced Priscilla. "But after she just the same as accused me of borrowing the down-stairs ink-bottle and never returning it, I couldn't like her any longer."

Whether Miss Green liked the gray-eyed Western girl, who was trying so hard in the face of so

many odds to like her was not as yet known. Perhaps she was slowly deciding whether or not Virginia might be trusted; and very soon events were to come to pass requiring that decision to be made.

The two halcyon weeks of October passed, and the shortened days began to grow colder. Already there was a touch of November in the air; and the girls were beginning to prefer to spend the half hour after supper around the open fire than out-of-doors. On Friday evening of the third week of school, there being a shorter study period of from eight to nine o'clock, they stayed later than usual, talking of various subjects as they sat on the floor around the open fire. Among other things they spoke of their "vocations" in life — each painting in glowing colors the ideal of her life-work. Mary was going to teach, and she already had her pattern, she said shyly, not venturing to look toward Miss Wallace out of courtesy to poor Miss Green, who sat opposite. Anne, who loved nothing so well as "doctoring" the girls when they would permit, would be a Red Cross nurse, bearing cheer and consolation wherever she went, like Mrs. Browning's "Court Lady," though she should wear a uniform instead of satin. Dorothy would go on the stage and charm young and old, like Maude Adams, her

idol, and never take part in any but up-lifting plays. Lucile longed to have a villa outside of Paris, and help poor American students, who had come to Paris to study art and had been unfortunate and unsuccessful. She had seen so many, she said. They were so pathetic; and she would give them encouragement and a fresh start. Priscilla said with a little embarrassment, that since every one was telling the truth, she must admit that she dreamed of being an author, and writing books that should inspire the world; and Virginia, who sat by her, all at once squeezed her hand tightly, and said that she longed to write also. Imogene "hadn't decided," and Vivian made them all laugh by saying she wanted more than anything else to have a home for orphan babies and take care of them every one herself.

Miss Wallace and Miss Green listened, the one with sympathetic, the other with amused interest. Neither of them spoke until the girls had finished; and then Miss Green, feeling that perhaps it was her duty to declare that dreams were fleeting, said,

"You must be careful, my dears, that unlike Ibsen's 'Master Builder,' you can climb as high as you build. Dreams are very well, but I have lived long enough to discover that one's vocation in life is usually thrust upon her."

"Horrors!" cried Dorothy. "Then I won't have any!"

The others were silent, all conscious of a dampening of enthusiasm. Miss Wallace stirred a little uneasily in her chair. Virginia, being honestly interested in Miss Green's observation, and feeling intuitively that some one should speak, broke the silence.

"Was your vocation thrust upon you, Miss Green?" she asked politely.

"It was," returned that lady, a little icily, the girls thought, but Virginia mistook the tone for one of regret.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "You can't be half so interested in it as you would be if you could have chosen it. If I were you, I would change, and choose another."

An inadvertent giggle from Imogene broke the embarrassed silence which followed Virginia's remark; and led Miss Green to mistake Virginia's honest interest for ill-bred sarcasm. She gathered the gray knit shawl, which she often wore, more closely about her shoulders, rose from her chair and left the room, saying in a frigid tone as she went:

"Will you come to my room, Virginia, immediately upon the ringing of the study-bell?"

"Why — certainly — Miss Green," stammered poor surprised Virginia.

"Mean old thing!" muttered Dorothy, as a slam of Miss Green's door announced her complete departure. "Virginia didn't —"

"Dorothy," warned Miss Wallace quietly.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Wallace. I forgot."

Then Miss Wallace tactfully turned the conversation into other channels, but Virginia could not enter into it with any interest. She could not think how she had been impolite. Such a thought had never entered her mind. Why had Imogene laughed? She caught Priscilla and Mary looking reproachfully at Imogene. Even Dorothy seemed annoyed. The study-bell put an end to the forced conversation, and as Virginia went slowly toward Miss Green's room, after encouraging pats and squeezes from the girls, who left her to go up-stairs, Miss Wallace asked Imogene to remain a few moments with her.

Virginia found Miss Green still in the gray shawl, and more icy and forbidding than when she had hurried from the room.

"Sit down, Virginia." Virginia obeyed, sitting on the couch.

"I must ask you to come nearer where I can see you more closely."

Virginia came nearer. Miss Green cleared her throat.

"I feel it my duty, Virginia, to talk with you. I am, indeed, sorry to be obliged to reprimand you so soon after your entrance in the school. I cannot understand your rudeness of—"

"But, Miss Green," Virginia interrupted, because she could not help it, "really I—"

"Do not add to your impoliteness by interrupting. Allow me to finish."

Virginia stammered an apology, her cheeks flushing painfully, her eyes bright, her heart rebellious.

"Will you explain your rude suggestion as to my change of occupation? Will you attempt to justify Imogene's giggle? It all looks to me like a contemptible conspiracy! Now, you may speak."

But for a long moment Virginia could not speak. Had she been at all to blame, she would have burst out crying; but the injustice of it all made her angry and too proud to cry. She choked back the tears which were blinding her eyes, and tried to swallow the lump in her throat. Miss Green waited, the epitome of wounded patience. At last Virginia spoke, and she spoke frankly, for she had not been in school long enough to know the meaning of diplomacy.

"Miss Green," she said, "I think you are very unjust. I felt sorry for you when you said your vocation had been thrust upon you. That is why I said I thought you would be happier if you changed. I don't know why Imogene laughed; but I think you are suspicious to think of a conspiracy. I don't know what you mean."

"Do not add impertinence to the list of your misdemeanors, Virginia." Miss Green was becoming angry — calmly so, perhaps, but angry.

"I do not mean to be impertinent, Miss Green. I — I — have been trying hard to like you"— her voice quavered and broke —"but I think you are unfair to me."

Miss Green's eyes and mouth opened simultaneously. She had never dreamed of such frankness in a pupil brought before her for a reprimand! She fidgeted uncomfortably in her chair. Perhaps, this interview had been long enough. It did not seem fruitful.

"Do not *try* to like me, I beg of you, Virginia. You seem to find it hard work. But I tell you, as I tell all my pupils, the day will come when you will be deeply grateful to me for my correction."

In her tumultuous heart Virginia doubted the ar-

rival of that day of gratitude. She waited for Miss Green to finish.

"We will grant, perhaps, that you may not have meant rudeness. I will give you the benefit of the doubt. But we must admit that you were hardly decorous in your remarks. Have you anything to say?"

Suddenly into Virginia's mind there came an idea — so quickly that she smiled a little, greatly to Miss Green's discomfiture.

"Yes, please," she answered in reply to the question asked her. "I can't seem to think. What is the noun for 'decorous'?"

Miss Green's eyes and mouth again widened, this time in greater astonishment. Evidently, this interview was not producing the desired change of heart. It would far better be ended. She cleared her throat again.

"The noun for 'decorous' is 'decorum.' I am sorry my words have had no greater effect. Good-night."

"Of course, it's *decorum,*" said Virginia, as she went toward the door. "How foolish of me to forget! You've really given me a brand new idea, Miss Green. Good-night." And she went upstairs, leaving behind her a puzzled and almost an-

gry woman, whose knowledge of having done her duty was in some way quite eclipsed by a strange, yet indisputable, sense of having been badly beaten.

Study hour was in session when Virginia hurried through the hall toward her room; but two doors noiselessly opened as she passed, and four hands extended notes, which she took wonderingly. The door opposite her own did not open. In her room, Priscilla, instead of studying, was writing furiously in her "Thought Book," which, apparently unread, had been sent two weeks before. As Virginia came in, she jumped up from the desk, and threw her arms around her.

"You poor, dear thing!" she cried. "We're all furious! You didn't do one thing but be polite. We're more furious at Imogene for giggling! That only aroused Greenie's suspicions. What did she say? Was she awful? I'm so glad you're not crying. You got the notes, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Virginia, returning the embrace. She read the notes. All expressed a mixture of fury, loyalty, and sympathy. Then she took down her own "Thought Book," for she had also begun to keep one, and placed the notes carefully between its pages. Priscilla watched her, puzzled. Most of the girls were crying with rage when they came from

Miss Green's room. Virginia opened the back part of her "Thought Book," and separated some thirty pages from those before. Then she dipped her pen in the ink, but before writing, turned to Priscilla.

"Priscilla," she said slowly, "she is a very unjust woman. I think she is very nearly a cruel one. I shall *never* try to like her again!"

While Priscilla watched her, more puzzled than ever, she began to write in large letters on the first of the pages thus separated.

"'ALL TRUE WISDOM IS GAINED ONLY THROUGH EXPERIENCE.'"

"These pages will contain accounts of wisdom-giving experiences, and will pertain especially to matters of Decorum."

"Experience I. Oct. 18. I have learned that the most careful politeness may be called rudeness. Also that Pity is *not* akin to Love, even though the Bible says it is. Also, that remarks, intended to be polite, about one's vocation, had best be avoided, especially when it is previously known that one's vocation has been thrust upon her.

Why these things are so,
I don't pretend to know."

She closed the book, and replaced it in her desk. Afterward she sat for a long moment watching a crescent moon sink below the horizon.

"Are you going to study to-night, Priscilla?" she asked at last.

Priscilla turned almost fiercely upon her. "I shall fail in Latin on Monday and Tuesday, *anyway,*" she said, with unreasoning loyalty, "and maybe on Wednesday, and I'm not exactly sure about Thursday. I know it will hurt *me* and not *her,* but it doesn't seem as though I could ever get a good lesson for her again."

At nine there was an indignation meeting in their room, which every one attended, except Imogene and Vivian, and at which Virginia, though the center of attraction, said little. She appreciated their loyalty, but somehow she could not talk. It had all surprised her too much. But the others could talk. The room hummed with their vehement whisperings.

"It just shows how suspicious she is!"

"Never mind, Virginia. It's no disgrace to you."

"It's really Imogene's fault. Why did she giggle like that?"

"Do you suppose it could have been on pur-

pose?" Courageous Anne ventured to give voice to a suspicion which, except for Dorothy, seemed general enough.

But Dorothy, though annoyed at Imogene's thoughtlessness, which had caused trouble for Virginia, was loath to believe that it had arisen from anything but thoughtlessness. To speak truly, Dorothy was fascinated by Imogene — her wit, money, clothes, and, above all, by her air of wisdom, and her "don't care" ways. Therefore she defended her hotly.

"Of course it wasn't on purpose, Anne!" she said indignantly. "Imogene wouldn't do such a thing!" But the silence which followed seemed to show that all did not share Dorothy's confidence; and Anne, growing more courageous, said:

"I'm not so sure about that."

"I'd like to know what Miss Wallace said to her."

"So should I."

"She was plain mad when she came up-stairs, for she slammed the door like anything."

"Yes, and I heard her give Vivian fits for having the window open."

But Imogene kept her own counsel, and no one knew what Miss Wallace had said. Neither did

they learn that night from Virginia of her interview with Miss Green. Her strange silence during the conference quelled the curiosity which prompted them to ask; and, when the nine-thirty bell rang, they went home, feeling that she was queer some way but that they liked her more than ever.

The world had suddenly lost its brightness for Virginia. She undressed in silence, and was in bed before Priscilla, who sat on the edge of her cot a moment before going to her own, and hugged her room-mate sympathetically. Virginia returned the hug with a bear-like one of her own, and kissed Priscilla good-night, but still she could not talk. Neither could she go to sleep. Long after Priscilla's breathing showed that she had forgotten indignation and all else, Virginia lay awake, choking back a great, obstinate lump of homesickness, which would rise in her throat. She longed for her father. He would understand as no one else could. She longed for Don, who would call Miss Green "an old prune." Most of all she longed for her own big country, where, her poor injured heart told her, people didn't look for impoliteness. And just this morning she had been so happy!

Then the tears came, and she sobbed into her pillow. "I'm not plucky at all," she thought, "be-

cause I *am* homesick, and I don't care if I am!" She felt better after a good cry, and thought she could go to sleep, but the room seemed warm and close, though the windows were open. She got out of bed, put on her kimono, and went to the French windows which opened upon the porch. The moon had set, but the sky was clear and star-filled. Unhesitatingly she opened the doors and stepped out. From where she stood no trees obstructed her view of the campus. The buildings stood dark and dim among the trees. It was so still that she could hear the brook falling over the stones, half a mile away. She felt better out there under the sky — somewhat as she felt among the mountains at home.

All at once she heard steps on the gravel walk. Who could be out so late. A bulky form emerging from the firs and coming along the walk below where she stood answered her question. It was Michael, the old night watchman. Were it not for fear of disturbing some one she would call to him, for she liked his funny Irish ways, and already they had become good friends. She went nearer the railing to watch him as he walked slowly toward West Cottage, and as she moved a board in the floor of the porch creaked.

Michael looked up hastily, and descried her figure.

He had been too long at St. Helen's not to know that young ladies on porches at midnight usually meant mischief, and he hurriedly retraced his steps toward The Hermitage, rounded the cottage, and — truly Fate was unkind! — rapped on Miss Green's instead of Miss Wallace's window.

So perfectly innocent was Virginia that she did not for one moment connect Michael's return with herself. Miss Green's room was on the other side of the cottage from her own, and she could not hear Michael's quiet warning. Therefore, she was surprised and not a little startled when she found herself five minutes later enveloped in a strange light. She turned around quickly to see in the doorway Miss Green, clothed in a gray flannel wrapper, and armed with a miniature search-light, which always accompanied her on her night journeyings. Virginia felt a strange desire to laugh. Miss Green's scant locks were arranged in curl-papers about her forehead; she still wore her spectacles; and the combination gave the sinister effect of a beetle. But the look on Miss Green's countenance checked the unborn laugh.

"What are you doing here on the porch at midnight?" Miss Green's words were punctuated with pauses of horror.

"Something inside of me said I'd feel happier out here, Miss Green."

Virginia's honest eyes looked into Miss Green's shrinking ones. Miss Green apparently felt uncomfortable. She wrestled again with that disagreeable sense of having been beaten. Slow as she was to perceive honesty, she could not doubt this girl who faced her with flushed cheeks and tear-swollen eyes. She stood aside, shivering in the night air, to let Virginia enter her room. Then she followed her. Once inside, she hesitated a moment, then locked the French windows, and slipped the key into her capacious pocket. Virginia's unwavering eyes watched her. She cleared her throat nervously.

"I need hardly remind you, Virginia, that it is highly indecorous for a young lady to stand on a porch at midnight in a kimono! Moreover, let us ever avoid all appearance of evil."

Then she went. Virginia heard her padded footsteps stealing down the stairs. Priscilla had, fortunately, not awakened. Virginia was too surprised to be angry. Had it really happened, or was it just a dream? She tried the French windows to make sure. They were securely locked. Then she laughed as she remembered Miss Green's curl-papers and spectacles and horrified expression.

She felt better after she had laughed. Perhaps now she could go to sleep. But not yet! She suddenly remembered her "Thought Book." This evening had been rich in new experiences. She did not venture to turn on the light. That might be indecorous at midnight. But, kneeling by the window, she traced these words by the dim light:

"Experience II. One need hardly be reminded that it is highly indecorous for a young lady to stand on a porch at midnight in a kimono. Moreover, let us ever avoid all appearance of evil!"

Then she crawled into bed and fell asleep.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAST STRAW

No really human girl, especially with the memory of Miss Green, clothed in curl-papers and horror, fresh in her mind, could resist relating such an experience as that of the night before to her roommate at least. Virginia was really human, and so she told Priscilla, who was wondering over the lost porch key, first vowing her to eternal secrecy, or, at all events, until it should be revealed whether or not Miss Green would feel it her duty to report the affair. They might have spared themselves a great deal of wonder and a little worry had they known that Miss Green, after due deliberation in the small hours of the morning, had decided that this was not a case for report. However, she had not decided at the same time that implicit trust might be placed in this somewhat unusual girl from Wyoming. She was still disturbed, and somewhat suspicious, as she recalled the events of the evening before, and felt that Virginia would "bear watching."

Breakfast that Saturday morning was a painfully lugubrious meal. To begin with, every one was late; and Miss Green's frigid manner really did not need the added coolness which she invariably bestowed upon late comers. Imogene did not appear, sending a headache as an excuse, and Vivian arrived, red-eyed from weeping, and minus a neck-tie. Mary and Anne were unusually silent, Lucile audibly wished for the "Continental Breakfast," and Dorothy openly snubbed Virginia, who hoped, perhaps not tactfully, but certainly genuinely, that Imogene was not ill. Priscilla and Virginia had come in late, but in good spirits, having just finished laughing over Miss Green's curl-papers. However, their good spirits waned in this atmosphere, only enlivened by Miss Wallace's futile attempt at conversation. Moreover, Miss Green felt Virginia's gayety very inappropriate under the circumstances, and apparently considered it her duty to extend toward her a cool reserve.

Poor Virginia, who upon awaking had decided to try to forget all the discomfort of the evening before and be happy again, felt her resolution impossible of fulfillment in this atmosphere; and by the time breakfast was over (be assured it was a short repast) was as discouraged and homesick as the

night before. She declined Mary's and Anne's invitation to walk with them and the sad-eyed Vivian to the village after Saturday morning's house-cleaning; refused to play tennis with Priscilla and the Blackmore twins (two jolly girls from Hathaway); quite enraged Dorothy by discovering her and Imogene in secret conversation, when she went to find her sweater which Lucile had borrowed; and at last, completely discouraged, and sick of everything, wandered off down the hill by herself, pretending not to hear some girls from King Cottage, who called to her to wait.

On the way she met the postman, who handed her three letters. She stuffed them in her pocket; and then, for fear of being followed by the King girls, hurried into the woods by a short cut she had already discovered, and found her way to the little gray stone chapel. She opened the door and went in, but it seemed cold and damp inside, and she came out again into the sunshine.

Here she was practically sure of being undisturbed, for the girls did not often visit St. Helen's Retreat on Saturday morning. She sat down on the stone steps and listened to the wind in the pine trees, which completely surrounded the little chapel. Shafts of sunlight fell through the branches upon

the brown needles beneath. In among the tangled thickets beyond the trees, the birds were gathering to go southward. They seemed in a great bustle of preparation. Virginia spied thrushes and towhees, brown thrashers and robins in great numbers; also many bluebirds, whose color was not so brilliant as that of their mountain bluebird at home. The English sparrows, however, were undisturbed by thoughts of moving, and chattered about the eaves of the Retreat, quite lazy and content.

At any other time Virginia would have watched the birds with eager interest, creeping through the thickets to observe them, for she was a real little student of their ways, and loved them dearly. But to-day the world was wrong, and birds were just birds, she told herself,— nothing more! Besides, she had been treated unjustly and unfairly, and she had a good cause for feeling blue. No one could blame her — not even Donald, whose words kept coming to her. She wished Don had never said them — they bothered her!

She drew her letters from her pocket. In a way, she hated to read them, she said to herself, because they would make her more homesick. But in a very short time curiosity overcame her, and she began to open them eagerly. Two were from her father and

Don, the other from Aunt Lou in California. She read Aunt Lou's first — saving the best for the last. Aunt Lou was glad to hear such pleasing reports both from those in Vermont, and from Miss King. From Grandmother Webster she had been convinced that Colonel Standish was a gentleman, though she would again warn Virginia that one could not be too careful. She knew that St. Helen's and her experiences there would surely be the making of Virginia, etc., etc.

Virginia folded the letter. In a way she could not help feeling glad that her grandmother and Aunt Nan, and especially Miss King, were pleased with her. Still, if Miss Green told, would Miss King understand? But it was of no use to worry, and it was in a little better humor that she opened Donald's letter.

He had missed her, he said. Everything had seemed lost without her. It was no fun riding alone, and he had been glad when October came, and he had gone to Colorado. He liked it much better than the East. The fellows were more his sort, and they rode a lot; but not one of them could ride better than she.

"I'm mighty glad," the letter ended, "that Mary Williams is in your cottage. She's a peach, isn't

she? Jack's all right, too. He wrote me the other day that maybe he would come to Wyoming another summer. Wouldn't it be great if Mary could visit you then? I'm glad you've got a good room-mate. Don't forget though, you promised not to be a young lady in June!"

Before she opened her father's letter, Virginia felt decidedly better. Wouldn't it be wonderful if Mary could go to Wyoming with Jack? Maybe — of course, not *probably,* but maybe — Priscilla's father might let her go, too. Dreams of glorious days in the mountains made her eyes shine. She was almost happy again.

Her father's dear fat letter was supplemented by a laboriously written one from Jim, and a note — yes, actually a note from William. And William could write a good hand, without misspelling a word! Jim's letter told her that the little colt was growing beautifully, and was the image of his mother; that he hadn't much minded the branding; and that Joe sent his best regards and wished to say that the lump in the littlest collie's throat had quite disappeared. His rheumatism got worse, he said, with the colder weather, and he read her books a lot for company. He closed by saying they all missed her worse every day, and by asking her for

them all how she liked the saddle, and "how it set"?

William's note told her that he should send by the next mail two sets of rattles, whose former owners he had killed the week before; and that he had already planted her garden with some perennials which he knew she would like. He would not tell her what they were, as he wanted to surprise her.

She read her father's letter over and over again. It was filled with pride, for he, too, had received a letter from Miss King, and — what was stranger yet! — actually one from Grandmother Webster, telling of their pleasure in Virginia. He was glad every day that she was so happy at St. Helen's. Were she often homesick, he would be troubled; but her happiness made his loneliness the less.

The fall threshing was over, he said, and the round-up and branding completed. The men were having a much-needed rest. William had not gone to town once since she left, and if he continued in his determination, she would not know him when she came home. Jim, he was sorry to tell her, seemed far from well. The Keiths were also finished with the hardest of the fall labor; and they had all decided to ride up the canyon the next Saturday —"To-day," thought Virginia — and camp for

over Sunday, just for a change. How they wished she and Don were there to go along!

Virginia folded the letter and jumped to her feet. An idea had seized her, dispelling the few remaining blues, for to a nature like her own a new idea is often a cure-all. Why had she not thought of it before? She would ride to-day, just as they were doing at home. Not yet had she used her new saddle, but really there had been little opportunity. The days had been too filled with lessons and getting acquainted to allow much time for riding; and they had now become so short that it was impossible after supper. The first two Saturdays had been taken up — one by a tennis tournament, the other by the Senior and Junior basket-ball game — and this was only the third.

But to-day she would ride. She would hurry home, learn her lessons — yes, she even thought she might learn her Latin — and then after luncheon have the man from the village stable bring up the horse he had recommended at a previous interview.

The atmosphere at luncheon was less chilled. Mary, Anne, and Vivian brought from the village the glad tidings that the "Forget-me-not" would be open all winter, and serve hot chocolate and cakes instead of sundaes; Priscilla and Lucile had

won four sets from the Blackmore twins; and Virginia's spirits were certainly improved. Only Imogene and Dorothy, who had been together all the morning, preserved, the one a haughty, the other an embarrassed, silence.

Virginia's announcement that she was to ride brought forth great interest on the part of the girls, and solicitude on the part of Miss Green.

"You have permission, I presume, Virginia?"

"Oh, certainly, Miss Green. I've talked with Miss King all about it," answered Virginia, striving to be polite. Later, when she heard Miss Green supplementing over the telephone her own directions to the stable-man, and cautioning him to bring the safest horse in the stable, she tried not to mind.

The horse arrived. To The Hermitage girls, and several from Hathaway, who had come over to watch the proceedings, and who, if they had ridden at all, had mounted nothing larger than ponies, he was a huge beast. They watched with great interest while Virginia herself threw across his broad back her shining new saddle, and tightened the girths.

"What a queer saddle!"

"What's that thing in front, Virginia?"

"The saddle-horn."

"Aren't you afraid you'll fall against it and hurt you?"

Virginia laughed. "Oh, no!"

"See the 'V. H.' on the brass, Anne. Some style to you, Virginia!"

"What's the horse's name, Mr. Hanly?" asked Virginia, preparing to mount.

"Napoleon Bonaparte."

The girls laughed. Virginia swung herself into the saddle. To the admiring girls it seemed as though she had not touched the stirrup at all. She gathered her reins in one hand.

"Remember, you're to try him, Priscilla, when I get back," she called, riding away.

From one of the lower windows of the Hermitage, some one cleared her throat.

"Use extreme caution, Virginia," some one called, but Virginia was already out of hearing.

She had intended to ride down to the gate-posts, and then farther out into the country on the road which led away from Hillcrest. But by the time she came in sight of the stone posts she had quite decidedly changed her mind. Napoleon Bonaparte was hopeless! If he had not so annoyed her she might have laughed at his combination of gaits. His trot was torture; and it was only by the utmost

urging that one could prevail upon him to canter. This urging, Virginia discovered to her surprise, was most effective when accomplished by yanking upon the reins, a proceeding which a Western horse would not have borne at all. His periods of willingness to canter were of short duration, for which the rider at the end of the period usually felt thankful. Moreover, he invariably stumbled when going down hill; and, to cap the climax, and add the finishing touch, he had the asthma, and, after a few moments of speed, sounded like a freight train.

The gate-posts reached, Virginia was resolved upon one thing! She could not ride Napoleon! She would ride to the village stable and see if a change were possible. She turned Napoleon's heavy head, and rode on, wondering what Donald would say if he could see her steed, and greatly hoping that the village stable contained some improvement.

Mr. Hanly, who had driven down with the mail-carrier just ahead of her, met her at the stable door.

"Anything the trouble, miss?"

Virginia for the moment ignored his question.

"Mr. Hanly, how old is Napoleon?"

Mr. Hanly calculated. "About eighteen, miss."

"Eighteen!" cried Virginia. "Then I don't wonder! Why, Mr. Hanly, he can't go at all. He

hasn't a gait to his name! Besides, he wheezes terribly. Has he the asthma?"

Mr. Hanly explained that for years Napoleon had been afflicted with a chronic cold; but that he had been in his day a good saddle-horse, and safe.

"Oh, he's perfectly safe, Mr. Hanly! He's too safe! But, you see, I've ridden all my life, and I can't ride him. I really can't! Haven't you something else?"

Mr. Hanly considered. Yes, he had a saddle-horse belonging to a Hillcrest gentleman, who was away at present, but who had left word that his horse might be exercised. Still, he would hardly venture to saddle him for Virginia. He was safe enough, but inclined to take the bit in his teeth. No, he would not dare to allow her to have him. Still, she might look at him if she liked.

Virginia swung herself off Napoleon, and went in the stable to view the horse described. He was assuredly not in the same class as Napoleon. She knew by his build that he was a good saddle-horse. She *must* have him, she thought to herself. Fifteen minutes later, the persuaded, if not convinced, Mr. Hanly was somewhat dubiously removing the saddle from poor, perspiring Napoleon, and strapping it, with Virginia's help, on the back of the black horse.

In another moment Virginia was up and away, leaving Mr. Hanly, who was watching her, somewhat reassured in the doorway.

This was something like riding, she told herself, as she cantered along the country road. The black horse, though nothing like her own Pedro, was still a good horse. He could even singlefoot, and did not have the asthma.

She rode miles into the country beyond St. Helen's. The afternoon was perfect — one of those autumn afternoons when the summer lingers, loath to go; when the leaves drift slowly down, and the air is filled with an unseen chorus; and when all about an Unseen Presence makes itself felt, and causes one to feel in harmony with the God of the Out-of-doors.

Virginia's cheeks were rosy red; her hair was flying in the wind, for she had lost her ribbon, and had long since stuffed her cap in her pocket; her eyes were glowing with happiness. She reached the Five Mile Crossways and turned back toward home. Then the black horse showed his paces. He fairly flew over the road, Virginia delighting in his every motion. One mile — two — three — he galloped furiously. They were within a mile of St. Helen's. Virginia sought to quiet him, but he was on the

"SOME RODS AHEAD, VIRGINIA ESPIED A LONE FIGURE A GRAY SHAWL."

homeward way, and he knew it. They rounded a curve, still on the gallop, when some rods ahead, Virginia espied a lone figure in a gray shawl. It was Miss Green. Virginia strove with all her might to pull the black horse into a walk so that she might speak, but he did not choose to walk; and it was with a considerably lessened, but, to the startled Miss Green, furious gallop that they passed, Virginia waving her hand as her only means of salutation. She heard Miss Green's peremptory and horrified command for her to stop, but she could not heed it. Her mind was at that time completely occupied with wondering if the horse would willingly turn into the avenue leading to St. Helen's. Fortunately he did, perhaps imagining it for a new entrance to his stable, and Virginia disappeared from sight among the pines.

It is safe to say that Miss Harriet Green never before ascended the hill leading to St. Helen's in such a short space of time. When she arrived, quite out of breath, at The Hermitage, Priscilla was just preparing to mount the black steed, before the eyes of an interested audience. She waved her hand as a signal for operations to cease until she might find breath to speak. Then, after clearing her throat vigorously:

"Priscilla," she said, "dismount immediately. Virginia, tie that dangerous animal to the hitching-post. Mary, telephone Mr. Hanly to come at once and take him away. Virginia, you will now walk with me to Miss King's office!"

The girls listened mystified. What had Virginia done? Virginia, more dazed than they, obediently followed Miss Green, who, in stony silence, crossed the campus, and into Miss King's gold and brown room. Miss King sat by the western window, a book in her hand. She smiled as they entered, a smile that died away at the sight of Miss Green's face.

"What is it?" she asked.

Miss Green spoke, acidly and at length. Virginia, standing by the window, listened, still dazed, to this tale of her willful disobedience, her foolhardiness, her cruelty to animals, her refusal to stop at a command from her teacher. When Miss Green had finished, she turned to Virginia, as though expecting a denial, or an explanation, but Virginia did not speak. Miss King did, however — very quietly.

"You did quite right, Miss Green, in coming to me, since you did not understand matters — quite right. You see, as regards horseback riding, I left

the choice of a horse entirely to Virginia, because we know so little of horses, and I know she is thoroughly familiar with them. I am sure she will always be careful of my desires, which I have fully described to her. Virginia, if you will remain a few minutes, I will talk this matter over with you."

Miss Green left the room, with feelings quite indescribable. Virginia, still in khaki, with disorderly hair and a heightened color in her cheeks, remained with Miss King. For half an hour they talked together of books and lessons, of Thanksgiving and Vermont, of Wyoming and the mountains. Strangely enough, except for the briefest explanation of Virginia's inability to obey Miss Green, they did not speak of horseback riding; but when Virginia left she was far happier than when she had entered.

As for Miss King, she sat alone in the brown and gold room and watched the sun go down behind the hills. She seemed thoughtful — troubled, perhaps. By and by she rose from her seat by the window, went to the desk, and wrote a letter. Then she returned and sat in the twilight.

"Harriet has been with me a long time," she said to herself at last. "But neither because of her superior Latin instruction, nor for the sake of our old

friendship, can I any longer allow my girls in The Hermitage to lack a home atmosphere. Perhaps, after all, Athens needs Harriet. I may be doing the Ancient World a favor, who knows?" And the little, gray-haired lady smiled to herself in the twilight.

CHAPTER IX

THE THANKSGIVING ORATION OF LUCILE DU BOSE

"DOROTHY, do you think it's fair?"

The black eyes of Lucile Du Bose, ready at any moment to brim over with discouraged tears, implored her room-mate, who lay upon the couch, deep in a magazine.

"Dorothy, do you?"

Dorothy frowned. Apparently she had no thoughts on the subject, and did not wish to be disturbed.

"Do I what, Lucile? What's the matter, anyway?"

Her tone was petulant and not conducive to conversation; but poor Lucile was desperate.

"Do you think it's fair for me to have to write an oration on the Pilgrim Fathers? I don't know anything about them, Dorothy. Besides, I'm most all French; and I don't know how to start an oration, anyway!"

"Why, of course, it's fair enough. The others

all have to. Why not you? No one's to blame because you're French."

"But the rest don't all have to," persisted the injured Lucile, while Dorothy began again to read. "The Blackmore twins were allowed to take Ethan Allen, because he's their ancestor; and Miss Wallace told Virginia she could write on the Pioneers. Who are the Pioneers, Dorothy?"

"Search me!" Dorothy was in a forbidding temper. Of late even her devotion to Miss Wallace had not made her "angelic" to her room-mate.

Lucile chewed her pen-stock savagely. Something must be done. Study hour was nearly over, and Dorothy would be on her way to tennis or the "Forget-me-not." She would try once more.

"Dorothy?"

"Well!"

"Dorothy, if you'll tell me how an oration begins, I'll do your French sentences every day for two weeks."

Dorothy stopped reading. This was worth considering, since her rank in French had been B for some time. Of late Dorothy's resolutions made in the fall had been considerably bent if not broken. Still it would not do to accept with too much alacrity. She closed the magazine.

"I can't see, Lucile, how you can have been studying orations all the fall with Miss Wallace, and not know what one is like. Don't you listen in class?"

"Of course I do; but they're so dry I forgot them. I know Napoleon's 'Address to his Troops,' but I can't understand Washington and Webster. If I could just begin this I might go on. It's got to sound patriotic, you know, and thrilling, like 'Soldiers! you have precipitated yourselves like a torrent from the Apennines!'"

"But you're not talking *to* any one. You're talking *about* the Pilgrim Fathers. Now, why don't you begin like Lincoln? Of course, you can't say, 'Fourscore and seven years ago,' but you can subtract 1620 from now, and say — let me see — 'Fourteen score and thirteen years ago.' Now, I think that's original, Lucile."

Lucile looked more hopeful, and blew her nose for the last time. Then she began to write. After a few moments,

"I've done three sentences, Dorothy. They're landed safely. Now what shall I say?"

Dorothy was plainly impatient. Still there were those French sentences!

"Well, I should think you'd tell how they over-

came all the elements. Something like this, 'Nothing daunted them, breaking waves dashing high, or a stern and rockbound coast.' That's from a poem, you know, called 'The Landing of the Pilgrims.' Then you might say something about their fortitude being an inspiration to us. Orations are all about that, you know,— bravery and inspiration and reverence and all kinds of memories. But for goodness' sake, Lucile, don't put my words down! I just suggest. You must write your own words."

"Why, of course I will. I'm just putting it down roughly now, you see. I'll do it all over this evening. Oh, dear, here's Virginia and Priscilla and we're not half done. Do you suppose you'll have any thoughts this evening?"

"I can't tell. Come in!"

"Walk down to the 'Forget-me-not' with us, you two," said Priscilla. "My allowance has come, and I'm treating. This is the first hot chocolate and cake day. Jess Blackmore was down yesterday, and they told her. What's the matter, Lucile? You look sad."

"I'll have to change my shoes," said Dorothy. "Will you wait?"

"Yes, if you hurry. What's up, Lucile?"

Lucile, glad of an audience, returned to her old grievance.

"I don't think it's fair," she complained. "Virginia, if you had the Pioneers, why need I have the Pilgrim Fathers?"

"Why, I'd have soon had the Pilgrim Fathers," Virginia explained, "but I think real Americans ought to be just as proud of the Pioneers, because they were every bit as brave. They crossed the mountains to find new lands, and made homes in the wilderness, and fought Indians and wild animals. And no one here in New England seems to care about them. So I asked if I mightn't take them myself to give them a tribute."

"Oh, that's what a Pioneer is," said Lucile reflectively. "Well, why couldn't I take the Storming of the Bastille? My great grandfather helped. The Blackmores have Ethan Allen."

Dorothy sighed very audibly as she laced her boots. She was apparently dead sick of the Pilgrim Fathers.

"But, you see, Lucile," Virginia again explained, "Miss Wallace wants you to be more American now you're here at school, because your mother is American, and that's why she wants you to take the Pilgrim Fathers, so you'll appreciate your country more."

Lucile's black eyes snapped. She pushed her pa-

per away, and went to the closet, murmuring something in French under her breath that sounded very much like "Vive la France!"

Virginia's eyes fell on the crumpled and dog-eared piece of paper.

"Why, haven't you more than that done, Lucile? They have to be given to Miss Wallace to-morrow!"

The angry Lucile stamped her foot. This was quite too much to be borne. She was sick and tired of the Pilgrim Fathers, and all their patronizing descendants.

"No, I haven't," she cried. "And you needn't act as though you knew so much, Virginia Hunter, just because you can write compositions. You're out of it easy just because you've lived way out in the woods, and know all about Indians and wild animals. But *I've* lived in Paris, and there's a great difference between Wyoming and Paris, I'll have you to know!"

The scorn in Lucile's voice was not to be mistaken; but Virginia was equal to the occasion.

"Yes, of course there *is* a great difference," she said. "You see, Paris is frightfully small compared to Wyoming — I don't mean in size, you know, but in the way people look at things. In Paris, for instance, one thinks about clothes and a

good time and gayety; and in the mountains you'd feel mean thinking about such frivolous things."

Dorothy and Priscilla laughed, but Lucile grew angrier as Virginia continued sweetly,

"But I really wrote one on the Pilgrim Fathers, too, Lucile. Priscilla and I both did, and then tried to thrill each other by giving them. Would you like to hear mine? I have it right here in my blouse pocket."

Lucile's mind, slow to originate, was quick to grasp, and tenacious to retain. An idea came to her with Virginia's question, but she was too irritated to appear as eager as she really was to hear the oration. Here might be a way out of her difficulty. She brushed her sweater leisurely.

"I'm sure I don't care. You may if you like," she said at length.

"Oh, let's give those Pilgrim Fathers a rest!" cried the exasperated Dorothy. "I'm tired to death of them, and there won't be a cake left. Come on!"

Priscilla gave her a warning nudge and a sly wink. "No, let's hear Virginia first," she said. "It won't take five minutes, and her oration's a peach! Go on, Virginia!"

Virginia mounted the nearest chair, and drawing

a crumpled paper from her blouse pocket, began to read in a voice filled with emotion:

"How the very breaking waves of rockbound Cape Cod were thrilled when our Pilgrim forefathers first landed on the stern shores of our vast continent, then unrevealed. Methinks the ocean eagle himself burst into a pæan of praise! How the giant branches of the woods against a stormy sky waved banners of praise! No trumpet that sings of fame announced their coming! No roll of stirring drums saluted them! But their gospel hymns of cheer burst upon the naked solitude!

"They did not seek thus afar the jewels from the bowels of the earth, nor did they seek king's wealth or war's spoils, but rather the pure shrine of a truly childlike faith.

"Aye, classmates, let us in sooth call this soil of our dear State holy ground, for they trod here, and they left us an unstained freedom to worship the God of our Fathers, known of old!"

With a quiver in her voice Virginia finished, bowed to her audience and descended. Lucile was not blessed with a keen sense of humor. Still, as eloquent as it sounded, it might be a joke. She

glanced at Virginia's and Priscilla's serious faces, and was reassured.

"Oh, I wish I could do something like that!" she breathed.

"Isn't it fine?" Priscilla asked excitedly. "I told Virginia it had a real Patrick Henry ring. Don't you think so, Dorothy?"

"Elegant!" said Dorothy, emerging crimson from the depths of the closet. "Come on. Let's hurry!"

Virginia threw the piece of mangled paper in the waste basket. "I've another copy," she said carelessly, as they hurried down-stairs and out-of-doors. At the steps Lucile hesitated.

"I'll catch up," she said. "I've forgotten something. Go on."

She ran up-stairs while the three outside the fir trees laughed.

"Didn't she bite easily, though? I never thought she would bite like that. Poor Mrs. Hemans and Kipling!"

"It *was* mean," admitted Virginia, "but I just couldn't resist after that slam she gave Wyoming. I thought sure she'd see through it — Dorothy was so red; and, of course, I thought she knew 'The breaking waves dashed high.'"

"The best part of it all is," Dorothy whispered, "she's gone up to find that paper. Martha cleans this afternoon, you know, and Lucile wants to use that oration. I'll bet I'm not asked for any thoughts to-night!"

"Oh, no, she won't!" cried Virginia. "Dorothy, do you suppose she will?"

"You wait and see! Of course she will. Lucile's queer. She doesn't have any thoughts; and she can't see when a thing is funny. Miss Wallace doesn't have them read aloud, does she, Priscilla? Lucile especially asked that, and I told her she didn't."

"She didn't last year. Oh, if she did!"

They laughed again, but tried to calm down as Lucile, looking somewhat embarrassed, emerged from the fir trees. Then they proceeded to the "Forget-me-not," where they found most of St. Helen's assembled, and toasted the different classes and cottages in hot chocolate, served by a sallow youth with eye-glasses and a white duck coat, he evidently being likewise an innovation, like the chocolate and cakes.

On the way home Virginia's conscience pricked a little, and she confessed a slight mean feeling to Priscilla.

"You see, if I could be sure Miss Wallace wouldn't ask us to read them in class, it wouldn't be so bad. It's bad enough, if Lucile really uses that foolish thing, to have Miss Wallace read it alone; but, really, 'twould be frightful if Miss Wallace should call on her to read it. I don't know what I'd do! And every one would laugh! Oh, it is mean, Priscilla!"

"No, it isn't mean, it's just funny. You know things are different in school, Virginia, though I can never make mother see it. Now *jokes* aren't mean! Lucile just bit, and she'll learn in this way not to bite so easily. Also, that you get in trouble using other folks' work. Besides, if she's a sport, and takes it right, we'll all like her better. It *is* mean to set traps deliberately to get other girls into trouble, the way Imogene did to you the other night; and it's miserably mean to try to throw blame on some one else for what you've done yourself. Mother can't seem to see much difference, but dad and the boys can. Only jokes aren't mean; and we'd have been too slow for any use if we hadn't had some fun out of that oration when the chance came like that."

In study hour that evening, Lucile's conscience was also active, with better reason. Dorothy, in her

slippers, had stolen along the porch to Imogene's room, a way she had of doing lately, though it was quite against the rules. But Lucile did not need Dorothy's thoughts, for she was copying furiously from a piece of yellow paper, which she had taken from her handkerchief box. After all, she told her conscience, it was perfectly excusable, for the whole thing had been unfair. To expect her, whose great-grandfather had stormed the Bastille, to write an oration on the Pilgrim Fathers! Moreover, Virginia wasn't going to use it herself, she reasoned, so it really wasn't cheating; and she could help Virginia on her French some day to balance the account. Besides, Virginia would never know, because Miss Wallace never had them read in class; and, after all, it was not all Virginia's work, because Lucile must add some thoughts of her own to eke out the required length. Lucile was not a prolific thinker, but with the help of the Dictionary and "The Essentials of American History," she was progressing. By the time Dorothy returned, the oration was completed, though Lucile was strangely reticent concerning it. On her desk, Dorothy found a neatly written French exercise.

"Oh, Lucile, that's awfully good of you," she said, herself slightly conscience stricken.

"It's all right. You helped me, you know."

"Is the oration all done?"

"Yes. I — I wish I hadn't eaten those three cakes. I think I'll go to bed early."

Sophomore English recited from nine to ten, Miss Wallace desiring minds as fresh as possible. The morning following Lucile's desperate attempt and final accomplishment, a growing pile of manuscript on Miss Wallace's desk proved that youthful orators had been busy. Lucile and Virginia, coming a few moments late to class, deposited their papers on the top of the pile and took their seats. The recitation began, and for half an hour Miss Wallace questioned, listened, and explained. Then she closed her book, and motioned the girls to do the same.

"I'm going to introduce a custom which I have never introduced before," she said with the smile that had made her beloved during her three years at St. Helen's. "We have twenty-five minutes remaining. I am going to ask that two or three of our orations be read before the class. Virginia, you are on the top of the pile, perhaps a penalty for being late. We will hear your oration."

Virginia crossed the room, conflicting emotions sweeping over her. As to reading her own com-

position, she was quite willing, since Miss Wallace desired it; but she knew that Lucile's was next in order, and, as she turned to face the others, she saw Lucile's agonized face. Could she do anything to prevent her coming next? She hesitated. There was nothing except to hope that Miss Wallace would note Lucile's fear, and excuse her. Miss Wallace noticed the hesitation.

"Come, Virginia. We are waiting."

Virginia began to read, and as she read, she forgot Lucile in the hope that those listening might realize that the Pioneers of her own dear country were likewise Pilgrim Fathers. Her voice, sweet and clear, rang out earnestly:

"At this Thanksgiving season when we, as a nation, give honor to those brave men and women who founded the New England States, should we not also grant honor and homage to those other founders of our country — the children of the Pilgrim Fathers — the sturdy Pioneers of our Great West? In our praise of the Pilgrim Fathers, we often forget, I think, that there were other Pilgrims besides those at Plymouth Rock — other wanderers, who, perhaps, did not seek freedom to worship God, but who did seek better homes for their chil-

dren, and who tried by their discoveries to show that we had a bigger, richer country than we knew about.

"They did not cross the angry seas of water, but they crossed a sea of land, our great prairies, where there were even more perils than those of the Atlantic — perils of Indians, wild animals, cyclones, and blizzards. They crossed the mountains, cutting their own trails before them, protecting the tired women and helpless children from danger; and those who went to the Far West crossed the great deserts, suffering great hunger and worse thirst, and sometimes leaving their bones upon the sands."

Her voice as she read trembled with eagerness and pride. Into her mind crept the pictures of "old timers" at home, and the tales of bravery and endurance which they had told her. She read on, telling of more hardships, of greater bravery, extolling the lonely lives in the forests or mountains or on the great prairies. The girls listened eagerly. Many of them had never considered the Pioneers before. After all, they were worthy of praise. Virginia was holding her audience — all save the cowering Lucile, who was miserably knotting her handkerchief. The young orator closed with an appeal to her listeners:

"Oh, let us who are so greatly blessed with homes and friends and safety from the dangers that beset our forefathers, give thanks to God at this Thanksgiving season! And let us determine to show in our small lives the bravery and the perseverance and the honesty and the fear of doing wrong, which was shown by our Pilgrim forefathers of Massachusetts, and by the Pilgrim pioneers of our mountain and prairie States. Then shall we be more fit to be called real, true Americans!"

Virginia took her seat amid a burst of genuine applause, the most precious of which was her beloved teacher's own commendation and look of approval.

"Now, Lucile, you are next," continued the merciless Miss Wallace; and the trembling, cowering Lucile managed to cross the room, and take her own paper from the desk. For a moment Miss Wallace may have been tempted to withdraw her request. Virginia, whose pleasure in the reception of her own oration had quite disappeared in her pity for Lucile, kept hoping that she might reconsider; but she did not. Lucile must take her chances with the others, she was thinking. Here was an opportunity for overcoming her diffidence in class.

Lucile faced her audience, her eyes half angry, half frightened, her hands shaking. Her low trembling voice was hardly oratorical.

"Louder, please, Lucile," commanded Miss Wallace.

Virginia studiously looked out of the window. Lucile recommenced, and this time, so absolutely astonished and overcome was Miss Wallace, that the orator proceeded without interruption to the end.

"Fourteen score and thirteen years ago," read the trembling voice, "our Pilgrim forefathers landed on Plymouth Rock. The exact date was the 20th of December in the year of our Lord 1620. It was Monday when they got there and the women thought they would wash. All American women have washed ever since. Nothing daunted them, breaking waves dashing high, or a stern and rockbound coast, which is from a poem called 'The Landing of the Pilgrims.' They gave us bravery and inspiration and reverence and all kinds of memories."

The orator at this juncture cleared her throat desperately, and seemed to gather strength. She proceeded more calmly, and in somewhat louder tone.

"How the very breaking waves of rockbound

Cape Cod, situated on the eastern coast of Massachusetts, and so named for the fish that swim around it, were thrilled when our Pilgrim Fathers first landed on the shores of our vast continent, then unrevealed — America, named for a poor Italian author, Amerigo Vespucci. Many persons think the name would be better if it were Columbia, after the song, 'Columbia, the gem of the ocean.' Methinks the ocean eagle, a bird once inhabitating the shores of New England, but now extinct, himself burst into a pæan of praise! How the giant branches of the woods against a stormy sky waved banners of praise. No trumpet that sings of fame announced their coming! No roll of stirring drums saluted them! But their gospel hymns of cheer burst upon the naked solitude!

"They did not seek thus afar the jewels from the bowels of the earth, nor did they seek kings' wealth or war's spoils, but rather the pure shrine of a truly childlike faith. And almost the very first building they erected was a church!

"Aye, Sophomore classmates, I think you ought to call this soil of your dear State holy ground, for they trod here, and they have left you an unstained freedom to worship the God of your Fathers, known of old!"

The poor orator managed to reach her seat without encountering the eyes of Virginia; but she could not be unconscious of the postures of her classmates. Some with crimson cheeks and shaking shoulders were studiously regarding their textbooks; others, with a complete disregard either of hygiene or of good manners, were chewing their handkerchiefs; the Blackmore twins were weeping on each others' shoulders. Miss Wallace was fumbling in the drawer of her desk, and striving hard to control her quivering lips.

"This class is dismissed," she managed to say, without looking up, and the class, unspeakably glad to be dismissed, literally ran from the room, leaving poor Lucile, upon whom the joke was very slowly dawning, to come out alone, cut her Latin recitation, and seek her room. Here she locked the door against her room-mate, and packed her suit-case for New York where she was to spend Thanksgiving, glad that a telegram from relatives there had asked for her early departure on the afternoon train. She did not appear at luncheon.

"Poor thing! I guess she won't bite so easy next time," said Priscilla, as they left the table, where Miss Wallace, still smiling, was arranging a tray for the orator. "Let's be decent enough to

play tennis on the back court till she goes to the station. I know she doesn't want to see us, and I don't blame her a bit. It'll be forgotten when she gets back. You don't feel bad about it, do you, Virginia?"

"No, not now, but it was truly awful, Priscilla, when she looked so scared in class. I felt like a criminal. But I feel better now I've written the note."

"What note?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, and I signed your name, too; but I knew you'd want to. You see, I thought 'twould be too bad to have her go away for Thanksgiving, thinking we didn't like her and had been mean to her, because, you know, I don't think Lucile is very quick about seeing through things, and I wanted her to know we liked her all the same. So I wrote a verse, and slipped it under her door. It said:

'Dear Lucile:

It was a joke, and now it's made
We simply can't unmake it;
But we like you, and hope that you
Will be a sport and take it.

Happy Thanksgiving!
P. and V.'

You don't mind, do you?"

Priscilla threw her arm over Virginia's shoulder, and drew her toward the tennis court.

"No, of course I don't mind. I think 'twas mighty sweet of you to do it. You're queer, Virginia, but I like you, and I'm glad you're my roommate."

Virginia's eyes glowed with happiness.

"Glad!" she cried. "I'm gladder every day! And I just love you, Priscilla Winthrop!"

That evening Virginia added Experience III to the Decorum Chapter of her ever growing "Thought Book":

"In school it all depends upon how you feel inside when you do a thing as to whether it's mean or not. Jokes are not mean, unless you feel malicious when you conceive them. Also, it doesn't matter at all if a joke is played upon you. All it matters is whether you are a good sport and take it well."

CHAPTER X

THANKSGIVING AND MISS WALLACE

GOING home for the Thanksgiving holidays, though not forbidden, was discouraged at St. Helen's. The time was very short, there being less than a week's vacation allowed; and it had long been the custom, unless urgent demands came from home, for the girls to remain at school. It was not at all a hardship, for every one had such a royal good time. Moreover, the fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers and friends of the girls were always welcome, as far as accommodations in the village and at the school allowed; and for years Thanksgiving at St. Helen's had been a gala season.

This year it seemed even especially lovely. Indian summer had waited to come with Thanksgiving, and every day of the vacation was a golden one. Mr. and Mrs. Winthrop came to spend the holidays with Priscilla; and Mrs. Williams, a sweet, motherly lady, whom Virginia loved at once, came with Jack to see Mary. Virginia liked Jack, too, and the four

of them dreamed what Mary and Jack called "vain dreams" of a summer in Wyoming with Donald and Virginia. But the dreams were lovely anyway, and Mrs. Williams said with a mysterious smile that "perhaps they were not all in vain," which remark straightway inspired the youthful dreamers to build more air-castles.

Virginia liked Mr. and Mrs. Winthrop, also; and her heart beat fast with happiness when Mrs. Winthrop told her how glad she was to have her daughter room with Virginia. Mrs. Meredith, a flashily dressed woman with too many jewels, came for a day to bring the already over-supplied Imogene some new clothes and candy enough to make her ill for a week. Vivian's mother came, too. She had the same wistful, half-sad expression about her eyes which Vivian had, and Virginia liked her in spite of her silly clothes, and nervous solicitude over Vivian's every step. There was something pathetic about Mrs. Winters. She might so easily have been so different! And she did truly want Vivian to be the right kind of a girl. If only she didn't care so much for dress and style, Virginia thought to herself, then she might see that Imogene was not the best roommate for Vivian.

On Thanksgiving morning, an hour before din-

ner, Virginia was called to Miss King's room. Wonderingly she crossed the campus to the office, where to her joy she found dear, brisk Aunt Nan, who had run down just for the day to see how her niece was getting along. Apparently Miss King had satisfied her before Virginia entered, for she seemed very proud of the gray-eyed little girl, who was growing taller every week.

"I really need to stay longer to let your dresses down, dear," she said. "But at Christmas time we'll have a seamstress, and you can't grow much in four weeks. Your grandmother and aunt can hardly wait for Christmas, Virginia."

This made Virginia happier than ever, for she had dreaded Christmas in Vermont without her father. But now it was really something to look forward to, since even grandmother wanted her so much. She and Aunt Nan talked with Miss King for a while, and then walked about the campus until time to dress for dinner. St. Helen's had changed a good deal since Aunt Nan's day. There had been only thirty girls then, she told Virginia, and two cottages, King and Willow. As they walked about, the Williamses and Winthrops, together with Anne and Dorothy, joined them, and Virginia proudly introduced Aunt Nan, who made them all laugh with

the tales of her experiences and escapades at St. Helen's years ago.

Then, the bell on the main building warning them, they hurried in to dress for dinner, which The Hermitage girls and those of Hathaway together with their friends were to have at Hathaway. Each year one cottage was hostess to another. This year Hathaway had bidden The Hermitage, Overlook was entertaining West, and King and Willow were celebrating together. It was a merry, happy family that assembled in Hathaway half an hour later. The tables, arranged in the form of a hollow square, were gay with centerpieces of yellow chrysanthemums, and strewn with yellow leaves, gathered weeks before and pressed for the occasion. There were dainty place-cards upon which the Hathaway girls with skillful fingers had drawn and painted pumpkins, log-houses, turkeys, and miniature Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers; and as each found her place at the table, she discovered also a slip of paper with an appropriate Thanksgiving verse. This form of Thanksgiving grace Miss King had originated. "Each one must give thanks for the day," she always said; and before the table was seated, each read aloud her verse or bit of prose.

Miss King, who, year by year, dined with each

cottage in turn, was this year the guest of the proud Hathaway girls. It was she who gave first the grace she had given on each Thanksgiving for many years:

"Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands.

Serve the Lord with gladness: come before His presence with singing.

Know ye that the Lord He is God: it is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise: be thankful unto Him, and bless His name.

For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting; and His truth endureth to all generations. Praise ye the Lord."

The others followed. Virginia's was her favorite stanza from a new poem, which Miss Wallace had read to her only the night before. Miss Wallace must have selected it for her. She looked toward her gratefully, as she read in her clear voice:

"A haze on the far horizon,
  The infinite, tender sky,
The ripe, rich tint of the corn-fields,
  And the wild geese sailing high;
And all over upland and lowland
  The charm of the goldenrod;
Some of us call it Autumn,
  And others call it God."

Each having read her selection, they sang all together, as on every Thanksgiving Day for thirty years the St. Helen's girls had done, that old, universal song of praise, which the world will never outgrow:

> "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,
> Praise Him all creatures here below,
> Praise Him above ye heavenly host,
> Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

Then, with a renewed feeling of thankfulness and happiness, every one sat down, and the bountiful dinner was served. Virginia sat between Aunt Nan and Mary, and opposite the Blackmore twins, whose father had come to spend the day with them. He was the jolliest man imaginable, "even though he is a minister," as Jean Blackmore often said, and kept the entire table laughing over his jokes and funny stories. Virginia mentally compared him with the Rev. Samuel Baxter, and could not resist whispering to Aunt Nan:

"Wouldn't Dr. Baxter be shocked if he were here?"

"I wish he were!" Aunt Nan whispered back. "Maybe he'd be so shocked he couldn't get back to Webster!"

They sat for a long time after dinner was over,

talking with each other and enjoying the informal after-dinner speeches. As they left the dining-room, and passed into the big living-room to listen to some music, a large automobile stopped at the door, and a tall, white-haired gentleman in a gray overcoat stepped out and was about to ring the bell. But, before he had time, he was seized by a gray-eyed girl in a white dress, who had burst open the door, crying:

"Oh, Colonel Standish! Have you really, really come to see me?"

"Why, Miss Virginia," said the Colonel, pausing to shake hands cordially with Aunt Nan, "I've been having Thanksgiving dinner with that grandson of mine at the Gordon school; and I told my man he must drive around this way to give me just a glimpse of you before taking me back to the city. And how goes everything, my dear? Is the 'making of you' progressing?" And he smiled in remembrance of their journey together.

Virginia was so delighted to see him that she could hardly speak.

"I think so, sir. Everything's lovely anyway. Oh, Priscilla, come here!"

"I wonder if you're not the girl who knows my grandson?" the Colonel asked Priscilla. "He was

telling me he knew a St. Helen's girl at Vineyard Haven this summer named Priscilla Winthrop."

"Do you mean Carver Standish, sir? Why, of course, I know him. He taught me to swim this summer. I don't know why I didn't think of him when Virginia told me that your name was Colonel Standish," said Priscilla to Virginia's delight. To think Priscilla knew Colonel Standish's grandson!

Then the Winthrops must be introduced, and the Williamses and Anne and Dorothy, together with Miss King and Miss Wallace, until the Colonel declared that he felt quite at home. It seemed about a minute to Virginia before he said that he must go, in spite of entreaties and cordial invitations to share the festivities of the afternoon. But he should come again, he said, and the next time he would bring his grandson. Virginia watched the big car as it disappeared below the hill; and later, as they drove together in the early evening to the station, she told Aunt Nan that the Colonel's coming had made her day complete.

"Give my love to grandmother, Aunt Nan," she said, as they told each other good-by, "and kiss her twice for me, if you think she'd like it."

"I'm sure she would, Virginia," answered Aunt Nan. "She's counting the days until Christmas."

And the train that carried Aunt Nan northward left a very happy girl on the station platform.

But of all the happiness which Thanksgiving brought, the loveliest was the opportunity it gave her to know Miss Wallace better. Miss Green had gone to Boston for the holidays, and since The Hermitage was filled to overflowing, Priscilla and Virginia stayed in her room, giving their own to the Winthrops. Miss Green's room was next to Miss Wallace's; and since Priscilla was constantly with her father and mother, Virginia, though always asked with Dorothy to join the party, seized the privilege afforded her of being with Miss Wallace. Miss Wallace was also glad, for she loved Virginia. Policy, when school was in session, forbade, with total disregard for a teacher's preferences, a greater intimacy with one girl than with another; but in the vacation days following Thanksgiving, when Virginia was more or less alone, their friendship grew and ripened into a close understanding between them.

Virginia discovered that Miss Wallace loved her best book friends — "Pollyanna," Pip in "Great Expectations," poor Smike in "Nicholas Nickleby," David Balfour, Sydney Carton, Sohrab, and dear Margaret in "The Cloister and the Hearth." They spent two lovely long evenings reading together be-

fore the open fire in Miss Wallace's cheery room, and some hours out-of-doors. Also, to Virginia's great delight, Miss Wallace expressed a desire to learn to ride; and thereupon followed a lesson with Miss Wallace on Napoleon, who, to her inexperienced eyes, was a veritable war-horse.

She was doubly glad and thankful for Miss Wallace's interest and friendship on the Monday following Thanksgiving. It was the last day of the vacation, and golden like the others. The Winthrop family and the Williamses, together with Anne and Dorothy, had motored to Riverside, twenty miles distant, to take their homeward bound train from there instead of Hillcrest. Virginia had been asked to join the party, but had declined, preferring to ride, and secretly hoping that Miss Wallace might be able to ride also. But Miss Wallace had papers to correct, sorry as she was, and Virginia tried to be content with the sunshine, the black horse, and a thick letter from her father, which the postman gave her as she rode past him down the hill.

Securing her reins to the horn of her saddle, she tore open her letter. So motionless did she sit while she read its contents that the black horse quite forgot he had a rider, and stopped to nibble at the bare, wayside bushes. A few moments later he must

have been surprised to feel a pair of arms about his neck, and a head against his mane; but he still nibbled on unconscious that the girl on his back was sobbing, and saying between her sobs,

"Oh, if you were Pedro, you might understand, but you haven't any heart at all!"

Still he chewed the alder bushes. It was not often that he was allowed to take refreshment when this girl rode him, and he intended to make the best of his advantages. He felt her raise her head after some long moments; but as yet there was no signal for departure. Virginia was reading her letter again through blinding tears.

"I have something to tell you, my dear little daughter, which I know will grieve you deeply," her father had written. It was this that had at first made her heart stand still. "Still, I feel that I should tell you, for sooner or later you must know. Dear old Jim left us last night to begin life over again Somewhere Else. He had been gradually failing for weeks, but he would not give up his work. Yesterday morning Pedro was taken ill, and Jim refused to leave him, saying over and over again that you had always trusted Pedro to him. He worked over him all day, undoubtedly saving

Pedro's life, and refusing to leave him, even though the other men insisted upon his giving place to them. At night the men left him to eat supper, for he still would not leave his post; and when they had finished and went back to the stable, Pedro was quite himself again, but they found Jim — asleep.

"I think you will feel as I do, dear, that it was like Jim to go that way — faithful to the end. We laid him to rest this morning in the side of the Spruce Ridge, near the great old tree to which you and he used to climb so often, especially when you were a little girl. You will remember how he loved the sweep of country from there. The morning was beautiful and clear — the very kind of day he loved best; and as we carried him up the hill, and laid him to rest, a meadow-lark sat on the stump of a quaking-asp and sang over and over again. That was the only prayer there was — that and our thoughts — but I am sure Jim would have chosen that for his farewell song."

Virginia could read no more. She pulled the head of the startled black horse away from the alders, and struck him with her spur. He started furiously down the hill, through the pines, and out into the country road. On and on they went, mile

after mile, but still in Virginia's ears rang her father's words, "Dear old Jim left us last night to begin life over again Somewhere Else." Jim, the comrade of her life, her trusted friend and adviser, whom she would never see again!

Again she struck the black horse with her spur. But the pounding of his feet on the hard road could not drown her father's words. And no one would understand, she cried to herself — not even Mary and Priscilla. To them Jim was a dear, interesting old man; to Dorothy a "character"; to Imogene a "common hired helper"! They would not be able to comprehend her grief, just as they had never been able to understand her love for him.

But riding did not help as she had hoped. She would go back. A half hour later she left the horse at the stable, and walked homeward, alone with her grief. She could not bear to see the girls just yet, so she turned aside and followed the woodsy little path that led to St. Helen's Retreat. It was still there — comfortingly still. She pushed open the door, and entered the little chapel, through whose long and narrow windows the sunlight fell in golden shafts upon the floor, and upon the white cloth that covered the little altar. Obeying something deep within her heart, Virginia knelt by the altar rail;

"VIRGINIA KNELT BY THE ALTAR RAIL."

and somehow in the stillness, the beauty and faithfulness of Jim's honest life overcame a little the sadness of his death.

How long she knelt there she did not know, but all at once she felt an arm around her, and heard Miss Wallace's voice say:

"Why, my dear child, what is it? Come out into the sunlight and tell me. You will take cold in here!"

Together they went out under the pines where the sun was warm and bright; and sitting there, with Miss Wallace's arms around her, Virginia told of her sorrow, and of dear old Jim, of whom Miss Wallace had already heard. Then she read her father's letter, and the tears which stood in Miss Wallace's eyes quite overflowed when she came to the part about the meadow-lark.

"And he loved the meadow-lark so!" sobbed Virginia. "It seems as though that one must have known!"

"Perhaps it did," Miss Wallace said with dear comfort. "I like to think that birds know many things that we cannot — many of the sweetest things like that."

"Oh, you're such a help!" breathed Virginia, the burden upon her heart already lighter. "You see,

the others can't understand why I loved him so. But you just seem to know some way."

"I think I do know, dear," Miss Wallace told her as they rose to go up the hill. "I want you always to tell me the things that trouble you, Virginia, and the things that make you glad, because we're real friends now, you know; real friends for always!"

And even in the midst of her grief, Virginia was happy — happy in the knowledge that she had gained a friend — a "real friend for always." In the hard days that followed, when so few understood why it was that the merry girl from Wyoming had suddenly grown less merry, that friendship was a tower of strength to Virginia — giving her courage and happiness when she most needed both; and proving, as it has proven so many times, that there is no sweeter, finer influence in life than the mutual helpfulness born of a friendship between a teacher and one of "her girls."

CHAPTER XI

THE DISCIPLINING OF MISS VAN RENSAELAR

"Oh, of course, Dorothy, do as you like! If you'd rather play tennis with the Wyoming Novelty than go down to the village with me, go ahead. Don't think for a moment that I care!"

Imogene leaned idly back among the pillows, while Dorothy studied the rug with a flushed face.

"You know it isn't that I'd rather, Imogene; but Virginia and I made an agreement that I'd teach her some tennis serves, and she'd teach me to ride. She's given me two lessons already, and now that the indoor courts are fixed I thought we'd play this afternoon, that's all."

"Go and play then. Don't mind me. I'm comfortable!"

Dorothy was silent for a moment. "I don't see why you dislike Virginia so, Imogene," she said at last.

"Dislike her? I don't dislike her, or like her either for that matter. I don't care one way or the

other. *My* friends have never been brought up in the backwoods, and don't weep over dead cow-boys; but, of course, you're at liberty to choose yours wherever you like."

The sarcasm in Imogene's tone was biting. Dorothy struggled with a strong desire to defend Virginia, and another as strong to keep in Imogene's favor. Completely ashamed of herself, she said nothing, and Imogene mercifully changed the subject.

"Has our Dutch aristocrat returned your penknife?"

"Not yet. How about your hammer?"

"I haven't seen it since she borrowed it, and I've ruined my nail-file trying to open the box of cake mother sent. She has her nerve! I found this on my desk this afternoon."

She showed Dorothy a slip of paper on which was written in a heavy black hand:

"Have borrowed your ink for the afternoon.

"K. VAN R."

"You don't mean to say she came in when there was no one here, and just took it!" gasped Dorothy.

"Oh, Vivian was here, I guess, but Viv hasn't the nerve of a rabbit. If Her Highness had chosen

to take the room, Viv would have gone along. But I'm going to do something very soon. I'm sick of this!"

An imperious knock sounded on the door, and without waiting to be bidden, the knocker entered. It was Miss Van Rensaelar herself, who, late in coming to St. Helen's, had arrived two weeks before. She was dressed in dark blue velvet with ermine furs, and looked undeniably handsome, with her blue eyes and faultless complexion. In one white-gloved hand she gingerly held an ink-bottle, which she extended.

"Here is your ink," she announced somewhat haughtily. "I'm sure I'm obliged. I forgot the hammer, but you can get it from my room if you need it. I go to the city for dinner. Good-by."

Imogene did not rise. "Good-by," she said in a tone which quite matched Miss Van Rensaelar's. "You might have the goodness to place the ink on my desk. It belongs there."

"Indeed!" Miss Van Rensaelar sniffed the air, but crossed the room with the ink-bottle, which she deposited upon the desk. Then she crossed again, her head a trifle higher if possible, and went out the door, which she left wide open.

Imogene was furious. She rose from the couch

to give vent to her feelings by slamming the door, but encountered Priscilla and Virginia just about to enter. Had she not wished to share her rage, she might not have been so gracious.

"Come in," she said, "and hear the latest!"

"What's she done now?" Priscilla whispered. "We met her in the hall, but she didn't deign to speak. Is she going to town to dine with the Holland ambassador, or what?"

"I don't know or care whom she's going to see," stormed Imogene, "but I know one thing! I'm not going to stand this sort of thing any longer. Borrowing everything is bad enough; but when it comes to lording it over the whole house, it's time to *do* something! Besides, she's a Freshman!"

"She isn't exactly a Freshman," said Virginia, not noting Imogene's displeasure. "Miss Wallace says she's been to several girls' schools on the Hudson already, but she doesn't stay. She's sort of a special, I guess. She's nearly eighteen, you know."

"I wasn't favored with a knowledge of her age," Imogene continued frigidly. "But I repeat, it's time to do something!"

"But what can we do?" asked Priscilla. "Of course we can refuse to lend our things, but that —"

"That isn't what I mean. I mean we ought to show her that she isn't everything in The Hermitage, or in all St. Helen's. She thinks she is! But she isn't! In college she'd be made to black boots, or run errands. I have a friend at Harvard and he told me all about the things they make fresh Freshmen do."

The thought of the haughty, velvet-clad Miss Van Rensaelar blacking boots was too much for Virginia and she laughed, thereby increasing Imogene's displeasure. Vivian arrived just at this point of the conversation, falling over the rug as she entered, which awkward proceeding greatly disturbed her room-mate.

"For mercy's sake, Viv, save the furniture, and do close the door! This isn't open house!"

Poor Vivian, a little uncertain as to whether or not she was welcome, straightened the rug and closed the door. Then she sat beside Virginia, who had made room for her on the couch.

"We might ask Mary. Maybe she'd have an idea," Priscilla suggested a little timidly, but Imogene did not receive the suggestion very kindly.

"Oh, I'm sick of this monitor business! Don't say a word to Mary. Whatever is done can be done

without her first assistance. I'm going to think of something before I go to bed to-night."

"She makes me think of Dick when he first came to the ranch," said Virginia. "He acted as though he were better than the other men, and knew a lot more, though he was only eighteen. He used to like to dress up and go to town at night, as though he were above them all. The men grew tired of his overbearing ways, and Jim and Alex decided he needed some discipline. So, one night when he had gone to town in his best clothes, they placed a big bucket of water over the bunk-house door, and arranged it so that when any one opened the door from the outside it would fall and drench him. Dick came home about midnight; and the men all lay in bed, waiting for him to open the door. He opened it, and down came all the water. Jim told father the next day that Dick just stood there wet through, and never said a word. But he understood, and after that he wasn't snobbish any more, but just one of the men, and they liked him a great deal better. I know I thought 'twas mean when Jim told father, but father said it was just what Dick needed to help make a man of him."

They had all listened to Virginia's story. Somehow they always did listen when Virginia told a

story for it was sure to be interesting. Imogene, though she stared out of the window while Virginia told it, was really listening most attentively of all; for, as Virginia talked, into her scheming mind flashed an idea, by the carrying out of which she might attain a two-fold purpose — namely, the desired disciplining of Miss Van Rensaelar, and the revenging of certain wrongs for which she held Virginia responsible.

Imogene did dislike Virginia, for no other reasons in the world than that the other girls liked her, and that their friendliness gave Virginia prominence at St. Helen's. Virginia did not seek popularity or influence, therefore she had both; but Imogene for two years had sought for both, and moreover had used every means to attain them. This year she saw her popularity waning. Even Dorothy did not seem to care so much for her. Instead she liked Virginia — a bitter pill for Imogene to swallow. As for influence, Imogene Meredith did possess a strong influence over her associates, but its strength did not lie in its goodness. Moreover, Imogene remembered a certain talk with Miss Wallace on the occasion of Virginia's trouble with Miss Green; and the memory of that talk still rankled bitterly. She *would* get even with Virginia, and show St. Helen's

that this Wyoming girl was not such a wonder after all. So as Virginia told her story and the others listened, Imogene smiled to herself and planned her revenge, Miss Van Rensaelar for the moment almost forgotten.

"Aren't you going to play tennis, Dorothy?" Virginia asked as she finished.

Dorothy hesitated. "Can't we play to-morrow, Virginia?" she asked, embarrassed. "I promised Imogene I'd walk to the village with her."

"Of course. It doesn't matter. Come on, Vivian. Priscilla and you and I'll play; and if Lucile doesn't want to make a fourth, we'll get Bess Shepard from Overlook. She said this morning that she'd like to play."

So while the others crossed the campus toward the gymnasium, Imogene and Dorothy started for Hillcrest, and upon arriving went to the "Forget-me-not," while the sallow-faced youth before mentioned served them hot chocolate, and lingered unnecessarily in Imogene's neighborhood. On the way home, peace having been restored between them, Imogene divulged her secret plan to Dorothy, or at least the half of it which she cared to divulge,—namely that upon their arrival home while every one was preparing for dinner, a pail of water be sus-

pended over Miss Van Rensaelar's door, so that upon her return she might be surprised into a more docile manner toward her housemates.

Dorothy giggled at the picture of the soaked Katrina, but obstacles presented themselves to her mind.

"It will be funny, but I think you'll get the worst of it instead of Katrina."

"How, I'd like to know?"

"Well, you're sure to be found out, because you can't fib about it, and there's so few of us in The Hermitage that all of us will be asked. Then, besides, it's funny, but I'm not so sure it's a joke. I think it's sort of mean." Dorothy said the last somewhat hesitatingly, noting the expression coming over Imogene's face.

"Don't be such a wet-blanket, Dot! Besides, I don't see how you're so sure I'll be found out. You certainly won't tell, and Viv won't dare to; and you know how St. Helen's feels about telling tales anyway. Besides, it's not my plan. You know who suggested it just this afternoon." And into Imogene's eyes crept a crafty expression, which told Dorothy more than her words.

"Oh, Imogene!" she cried, really indignant. "You know that isn't true! Virginia didn't pro-

pose it at all! She was just telling a story! You don't mean you'd do it yourself, and then lay the blame on Virginia!"

Imogene saw that she had made a mistake.

"Who's talking about blaming anybody? I guess I'm willing to take the blame for my own actions. Don't get so excited! I didn't exactly mean she proposed it. I just meant that I'd never have thought of such a good plan if it hadn't been for her."

Dorothy was not convinced. She never felt quite sure of Imogene, though she couldn't seem to help being fascinated by her.

"You see," she said hesitatingly, "if you had meant that Virginia suggested it, I'd think —"

"Well, think what?"

"I'd think that — that maybe you laughed on purpose that night down-stairs."

Imogene shrugged her shoulders, and looked, for her, rather uncomfortable.

"Isn't any one allowed to laugh, if anything strikes her funny? You're suspicious, Dorothy!"

But quarreling would not do if Dorothy's help were to be relied upon. Besides, the subject was distasteful, not to say dangerous. Imogene changed it hurriedly, and, by the time they reached The

Hermitage, the plan had once more assumed at least an honest aspect, and Dorothy was once more laughing at the thought of the drenched Katrina.

Meanwhile Miss Van Rensaelar was being entertained in the city, and regaling her friends with tales of the hopelessness of St. Helen's in general, and The Hermitage in particular. Such regulations as to hours! Such babyish girls! No style! No callers! No amusements, except tennis and basket-ball, and riding on impossible horses!

The truth was the trouble lay in Katrina Van Rensaelar, and not in St. Helen's. Katrina, "on account of having been detained by illness at a Long Island house-party," had not arrived at St. Helen's until after Thanksgiving. She was too late to enter any of the regular classes, and had been ranked as a "Special." The term really suited Katrina, for she was a special type of girl to which St. Helen's had not often been accustomed. She had too little desire for study and too much money — too little friendliness and too many ancestors.

Now, the possession of too many ancestors is difficult property to handle, especially in boarding-school, unless you are very expert in concealing your ownership. Katrina was not expert. On the contrary, disdaining concealment, she openly avowed her

ownership, and on the few occasions in which she had been known to engage in conversation, had announced that she was of the only original Dutch patroon stock of New York. There were girls at St. Helen's who were every bit as snobbish as Katrina with perhaps less to be snobbish about — Imogene was one — but somehow they had learned that if one wished to be popular, she concealed as far as possible her personal prejudices toward family and fortune.

Katrina, glad to be away from St. Helen's and to see some "life," as she termed it, accepted with thanks an invitation to remain over night in the city. Her friends telegraphed her intention to Miss King, promising to bring her in by machine early in the morning. Miss Green and Miss Wallace were accordingly informed of the fact that she would not return, but, as such irregularities were not encouraged, said nothing of her absence to the girls.

That night Vivian was a trifle late for supper, for truth to tell it had been Vivian whom Imogene had delegated to creep up-stairs with the water-filled pail, and hang it on a nail already provided above the door.

"You're lighter on your feet than I am, Viv," she had explained, "and no one will hear you. Just

because you hang it there doesn't mean that you're to blame at all. And remember, if to-night Miss Green questions you, you're to say, 'That's the way they discipline snobbish cow-boys in Wyoming.'"

Poor, short-sighted little Vivian, glad to be again in the favor of her adored Imogene, obediently hung the pail upon the nail, and descended to the dining-room, looking embarrassed as she took her seat. Miss Wallace's keen eyes noted the embarrassment, and caught also a shade of disapproval cross Imogene's face.

"You must have washed in a hurry, Vivian," whispered the unconscious Virginia, who sat next her. "There are drops all over your collar."

Vivian, more embarrassed than ever, raised her napkin to wipe the drops. Supper proceeded, but Miss Wallace had her clew.

All through study-hours, while the others worked, unconscious of any excitement, Dorothy, Imogene, and Vivian waited with bated breath for the return of Miss Van Rensaelar. But she did not come. At nine-thirty she had not returned, and there was nothing to do but go to bed and lie awake listening. The clock struck ten, and stealthy steps were heard in the corridor. Could that be Katrina returning?

No, for she would never soften her tread for fear of disturbing the sleepers. Who could it be? Whoever it was was going up the stairs, for they creaked a little. The girls held their breaths for one long moment. Then — a frightful splash, followed immediately by a crash and an unearthly shriek, rent The Hermitage. Those awake and those who had been sleeping rushed into the hall, in which the light was still burning. Down the stairs came a person in a gray flannel wrapper, which clung in wet folds about her shivering figure, and from every fold of which ran rivulets of water. The person's scant locks were plastered to her head, save in front, where from every curl-paper dripped drops as from an icicle. It was Miss Green! Frightened, furious, forbidding Miss Green!

Simultaneously the girls laughed — innocent and guilty alike. No one could have helped it — at least not they, who were, for the most part, completely surprised. And Miss Green, it must be admitted, was excruciatingly funny. She stood in the middle of the hall, dripped and glared. When she could command her trembling voice:

"Mary Williams, you are a Senior monitor, and do you laugh at such outrageous conduct?"

"I — I beg your pardon, Miss Green," stam-

mered Mary. "I really couldn't help it. I'm sorry."

"Will you explain this occurrence?"

"I really can't, Miss Green. I don't know anything about it."

At this juncture, hurried steps were heard on the stairs, and Miss Wallace mercifully appeared. When she saw Miss Green, her own lips quivered, but she restrained them. The shivering Miss Green explained the situation in a voice quivering with cold and anger. Then, as if her own conduct needed explanation:

"I went up-stairs merely to — to see if the windows were lowered, and this is what I received. Let us probe this disgusting matter to the bottom, Miss Wallace."

"I think you should first get into dry things," Miss Wallace suggested gently. "Then we will talk matters over. Girls, please go to your rooms."

The girls obeyed.

"One moment, please," Miss Green called imperiously. "Vivian, you were late at supper. Can you explain this matter. Answer me, can you?"

Poor frightened Vivian tried to look into Miss Green's glaring eyes, but failed miserably. She stammered, hesitated, was silent.

"Answer me, Vivian. What sort of a method of procedure is this?"

"Please — please, Miss Green, it's — it's —"

"Well, it's what?"

"It's the way they discipline sn-snobbish c-cowboys in Wyoming."

Utter silence reigned for a few long seconds. Miss Green stared at each of the mystified girls, until her eye fell upon Virginia, most mystified of all.

"For the present, Virginia," she said in measured tones, each one distinct, "I will inform you that methods which are in vogue upon a Wyoming ranch are not suitable in a young ladies' boarding-school. I will see you later."

She turned to go with Miss Wallace, still dripping, still glaring. Miss Wallace's face had become stern.

"Go to your rooms, girls. There will be no talking to-night. Please remember, Mary."

"Yes, Miss Wallace," promised the Senior monitor.

But the mystified Virginia and her wholly indignant room-mate could not resist some whispers.

"It's Imogene," whispered Priscilla, on Virginia's bed. "She made Vivian do it; and now she means

to put the blame on you, just because you told that story about Dick."

"Oh, she couldn't be so mean, Priscilla!"

"Yes, she could. She's just that kind. And if Miss Green blames you, I'm *going* to tell. I *am!*"

This, and much more, went on in whispers in their room, and, for that matter, in every other. No one could sleep, and a half hour later every girl heard Miss Wallace's voice at Imogene's door.

"Imogene, you are to come to my room at once. No, I don't wish you, Vivian. At once, please, Imogene."

It was fully an hour later when they heard Imogene reënter her room, but no one ventured either that night or in the morning to ask any questions. As for Virginia, she was summoned to no interview, and suffered no unjust reprimand, save Miss Green's piercing words, which she wrote, with a half-smile, in the chapter, "Pertaining Especially to Decorum":

"I will inform you that methods in vogue upon a Wyoming ranch are not suitable in a young ladies' boarding-school."

Miss Van Rensaelar, who returned the next morning, never knew what deluge she escaped. Imogene's manner forbade any interferences, but appar-

ently Vivian's life with her room-mate for the next few days was anything but a happy one. Secret discussions were held in The Hermitage, and likewise in the other cottages, for the news had spread; but Imogene and Vivian never attended, and Dorothy, if present, was silent and strangely embarrassed.

A week later when the newness of the affair had passed away, and when other topics occasionally came up for conversation, some news announced by Miss Green to her classes swept through St. Helen's like wild-fire. In recognition of years of faithful service, St. Helen's had presented Miss Green with a fund, with the request that she go to Athens for two years' study at the Classical School.

"Another vocation thrust upon her! Horrors! What will she do?" exclaimed Dorothy, at a meeting held in The Hermitage to discuss this unexpected, and, I am forced to say, welcome piece of information.

"Three cheers for St. Helen's!" cried one Blackmore twin.

"And groans for Athens!" cried the other.

So just before Christmas, Miss Green departed for Athens; and at the same time, Katrina Van Rensaelar, deciding to seek education elsewhere, left

for a place in which her ancestors would be more appreciated.

"And to be perfectly frank, daddy dear," wrote Virginia, "it's a welcome exodus!"

CHAPTER XII

THE VIGILANTES

THE weeks immediately following the Christmas holidays were always hard ones at St. Helen's. This year was no exception to the experience of every other year. The weather was cold and snowy, the girls were homesick, or, as was too often the case, half ill and listless from too many sweets and too much gayety during the vacation. Lessons were often poorly learned or not learned at all. In short, the St. Helen's faculty dreaded January, and the St. Helen's girls hated it.

"It's the worst month in the whole year," remarked Priscilla, standing by her window one Saturday afternoon, and watching a cold northeast storm whirl the snow-flakes from a gray, forbidding sky. "January's the out-of-sorts month, and every one in this whole school is out-of-sorts, too. I wish it were Christmas over again!"

"So do I," said Virginia from the other window.

Virginia had just caught the out-of-sorts epi-

demic. For a week at least after her return from Vermont, the memory of her own joyous Christmas had kept her happy. It had been such a lovely two weeks! She and her grandmother had grown to be such good friends. Virginia actually dared believe that her grandmother did not now disapprove of her in the least. She and Aunt Nan had had such a happy, jolly vacation; and even the Rev. Samuel Baxter had been most gracious, not once mentioning Korean missions or the sale of Bibles. But even memories were not proof against a general atmosphere of discontent, and she was beginning to be infected.

"There goes Dorothy in all this snow," announced Priscilla a moment later. "She's carrying books, too. Where's she going, I wonder?"

She rapped on the window. Dorothy either did not hear or did not choose to. The latter would be more thoroughly in keeping with her January disposition.

"I know. She's failed in geometry every day since we came back, and has to take private lessons with Miss Wells. Of course she didn't tell me, but I know she's failed because she's in my division. Bess Shepard told me yesterday that Dorothy was going to take lessons with her of Miss Wells in the

afternoon. Bess was sick, you know, and she's making up lost time. That's how I know."

Priscilla turned suddenly from the window and sat down on the couch.

"Virginia," she said, "I'm desperately worried about Dorothy. It isn't being untrue to her to talk with you about her, because you are her friend, too. She isn't a bit the way she was last year. She doesn't seem to care about lots of things the way she did then and when she was at our house this summer. Don't you think she's different from what she was even in September?"

Virginia left the window and sat beside her roommate.

"Yes," she said, "she is different. She laughs at things now that she didn't then; and she seems to be afraid of taking sides about things. I mean, whether anything's fair or not. She never likes to say what she thinks any more, like she used to."

"That's Imogene. I think it's almost all Imogene." Priscilla's voice was lowered to a whisper. "Dorothy likes Imogene because she has such a don't-care way about things, and because she has so much money, and dresses better than any girl in school, though *I* think her clothes are a sight! Mother thought Dorothy was different when she

was here Thanksgiving. She noticed it. I wish Imogene Meredith had never come here!"

Virginia's voice was also lowered. "She doesn't give Vivian a chance either. I think Vivian's dear and sweet; but Imogene makes her do everything she says, and poor Vivian's so easily influenced, she does it. You know what I'm thinking about especially?"

Priscilla nodded. She knew. They were both thinking of the "Flood," as St. Helen's now termed it, and of how Imogene had tried to shift the blame from her own shoulders on those of poor Vivian and unconscious Virginia.

"Of course I know. I told you then 'twas just like her. And Dorothy knew about that, too. I'm sure she did! She's so quiet whenever it's mentioned, and looks ashamed. And lately Dorothy's even been teasing Vivian, just as Imogene does, about that silly Leslie, who always gives Vivian extra large cakes at the 'Forget-me-not.' Oh, dear! I don't suppose there's anything I can do, but it worries me. Dorothy's my best friend along with you, and I don't want her to grow like Imogene. Can you keep a secret if I tell you one?"

"Of course, I can."

"Well, Dorothy visited Imogene at Christmas time. Not the whole vacation, because she spent

most of it with her aunt in New York. You know, her mother is dead, and her father is in California most of the time, so she spends vacations with her aunt. She was there for a week and a half, and then she went to Albany and visited Imogene, and that is why they came back together. They were late, too, because they stayed for a party Imogene gave. And the thing I mind most is that Dorothy never told she'd been there at all, just as though it were a secret. Only Vivian was at the party, and she mentioned it just as though I knew. Mother asked Dorothy to come home with me — mother feels sorry that she hasn't really any family like ours — but Dorothy said her aunt wasn't going to let her go anywhere this vacation. It isn't that I minded her not coming to us, you know, but I don't like to have her so much with Imogene, and, besides, I can't see why they keep it so secret."

Priscilla finished, troubled. Virginia was troubled, too, for she loved Dorothy, even though of late Dorothy had not seemed to care so much for her. She remembered the day she had first seen Priscilla and Dorothy at the station, and Dorothy's resolutions in regard to grades.

"Dorothy hasn't gotten all *A's* the way she planned in September, has she?"

"I think she had *B's* on her fall card, because she was ashamed of it, and wouldn't show it to mother at Thanksgiving. I know she hasn't done so well in class as she did last year. Miss Wallace and Miss Allan have reproved her more than once. And you know the house-meeting we had when Mary said The Hermitage couldn't win the scholarship cup away from Hathaway unless some of us who were getting *B's,* got *A's* for a change? Well, Dorothy just cut Mary for two days after that, and she isn't nice to her now. It does seem too bad when we've decided to try extra hard for the cup that Imogene and Dorothy pull us down. Even Vivian's been getting *A's,* and Lucile's doing better all the time, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is. Even in English she's really trying; and she's fine in French and Latin and geometry. Do you think Dorothy likes Miss Wallace as much as she used?"

"That's Imogene again. She called Miss Wallace Dorothy's 'idol' all the fall in that sneering way she has, and now Dorothy acts ashamed to show she loves Miss Wallace. She doesn't go to see her the way she did last year. Last year, if she were troubled about anything, she went right to Miss Wallace. Oh, dear, what shall we do?"

Virginia did not answer for a moment. She was thinking.

"Isn't life queer?" she said at last thoughtfully. "It all goes crooked when you most want it to go straight. But I have an idea, Priscilla. Let's be Vigilantes!"

"Vi-gi-lan-tes! What's that?"

"Why, don't you know about the Vigilantes? No, I don't suppose you do. Even Miss Wallace didn't till I told her. Why, the Vigilantes were brave men in the early days when the Pioneers were just going into Montana and Wyoming and the other States out there. You see, when they discovered that those States had such rich lands for wheat, and hills for cattle, and gold mines — especially the gold — people just flocked there by thousands. And, of course, there were many thieves and cutthroats and lawless men who went, too, and they just became the terror of the country.

"They rode swift horses, and they knew all the passes in the mountains. When they heard a train of men and horses was coming from the mines, they would lie in wait in the mountains and come down upon them, steal their gold and horses and murder any who resisted. It wasn't safe to take any journeys in those days."

"Well, but why did the people allow it? Why weren't they arrested?" Priscilla in her interest had forgotten all about being out-of-sorts.

"Why, you see the people couldn't help it at first. The country was so very new that law hadn't been made. The government did send judges out there; but there were so many lawless men that they threatened even the judges; and, besides, these robbers were perfectly wonderful shots, and they would scare the people so terribly that they were glad to get away with their lives.

"But by and by things grew so bad, and so many innocent persons who dared oppose the robbers were shot down, that some men banded together, and called themselves the Vigilantes. They pledged themselves to watch out for evil-doers, to stand for fair play, and to put a stop to robbery and murder. Of course, it was very hard at first, and many of the Vigilantes lost their lives; but pretty soon other bands were formed in the other towns, and they kept on, no matter how discouraged they were at times. They used to post signs on the roads that led to towns; and sometimes they would draw in red chalk on a cliff or even on the paving in town, warning the robbers and murderers that if they came into that place they would be captured."

"What did they do if they captured them?"

"They most usually hung them to a tree. The big tall cottonwoods out there are called 'gallows trees,' because they used to hang so many to their branches. It seems wicked now, of course," Virginia explained, seeing the horror on Priscilla's face, "to kill them like that — sometimes even without a trial. But really, Priscilla, they couldn't do anything else in order to save the good people from danger."

"No, of course, they couldn't. Mustn't it have been exciting?"

"Exciting? I rather think it was exciting! Jim used to tell me about it. There was one place in Montana named Virginia City where there were many of the Vigilantes. You see, there were very rich gold mines there, and that meant there were lawless men, too. Jim was there once, and he could remember some of the Vigilantes. He said there was one awful man, who had killed scores of persons, and who was the terror of the whole country. And the strangest part of it was, he was nice-looking and talked like a gentleman. The Vigilantes watched for him for ten years before they got him."

"Did they hang him from a cottonwood, too?"

"Yes; and Jim said when they had put the rope

around his neck, and were just going to lead his horse from under him he burst out laughing at them all, and said, 'Good-by, boys. I'm mighty sorry I can't tell you by and by how it feels to be hung. It's the only Western experience I've never enjoyed.'"

"After all he certainly was brave to die like that, laughing. He had Margaret of Salisbury's spirit. I always loved her, especially when she said if they wanted her head they must take it with her standing. Virginia, you know more thrilling stories than any one I ever knew. It just makes me wild to go away out there and visit you. Do you suppose I ever shall?"

"Yes, I just know you're coming. I shouldn't wonder if this very next summer. I feel it inside me. We can be Vigilantes for sure out there. That's just where they belong. But don't you think we could be sort of Vigilantes here — standing as they did for fair play and"— she lowered her voice —"watching out for evil-doers?"

Priscilla was enthusiastic over the idea. It seemed so different and original. Besides, it really did mean something to try to stand for fair play, and to watch out for anything — any evil influence, for example — that might harm those you loved.

"We'll especially try to see that Vivian isn't so easily influenced," Virginia whispered, "and we'll try our best to help Dorothy to be like she used to be. Only they mustn't know we're trying. That would spoil it all."

"Shall we ask any one else to join?" asked Priscilla.

"We might ask Mary. She's really a Vigilante anyway, being a monitor."

"Suppose we tell her about it, and ask her to be adviser. You see, where she's monitor, she can't take sides just as we can, and maybe she'd think she'd better not join. It's going to be a Secret Organization, isn't it?"

"Oh, of course. Secret things always seem more important. Let's draw up the constitution this minute. I like to feel settled."

Pen and ink were found, and within fifteen minutes the composition of the organization was complete, Virginia being the Thomas Jefferson of the occasion.

"I'll read it aloud," said the author, "so that we can tell if it sounds right.

"'We, the undersigned, on this 20th day of a sad January, do hereby announce in the sacred pres-

ence of each other, that we are Vigilantes of St. Helen's. We are bound by our honor as friends and room-mates to secrecy, and to an earnest performance of our work as true Vigilantes. We deplore the evil influence of —— ——, and we promise to strive to off-set that influence especially in regard to —— —— and —— ——. We are going to try to stand at all times for fair play, and real friendship. We appoint —— —— as our trusted adviser. At present we are the sole members of the Vigilante Order.

"'Signed

"'PRISCILLA ALDEN WINTHROP.

"'VIRGINIA WEBSTER HUNTER.'

"I put blanks instead of names," explained Virginia, signing her name after Priscilla. "It seems more like an organization some way, and, besides, we understand. Now, we are real Vigilantes, Priscilla."

They shook hands solemnly. The paper was sealed with an extravagant amount of sealing wax, and stuffed with much secrecy into a rent of Virginia's mattress. Then the two Vigilantes, feeling much revived in spirits, invited the disconsolate Vivian to join them, and went for a walk in the snow.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TEST OF CARVER STANDISH III

"Don't they hurt a bit, Jean?"

"No, of course not."

"Don't you feel at all sick either?"

"No, just mad! What's in that bag, Virginia?"

"Pop-corn. Can you eat it?"

"I should say I can. Haven't had anything but disgusting cream toast for four days. Put it under the letters so no one will see. What's that in the box, Priscilla?"

"Peggy Norris' white mice she bought down town. They're only a loan for to-day. Open the box right off or they'll smother."

"What do you do all day, Jean?"

"Oh, learn things by heart mostly. Miss Wood won't let me read, so I just glance and then recite. It's a comfort. I've learned the Ninety-first Psalm and 'Annabel Lee' and 'Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes' and the 'Address at Gettysburg' and 'One Thought of Marcus Aurelius.' I call that quite good."

"How do you know you're going to have them anyway, Jean?"

"Oh, you hate everybody for two days, and your eyes water the third. Is it all ready? Shall I pull? Be sure the mice are right side up. Here goes then!"

The taller Blackmore twin in a red wrapper and a bandaged throat leaned out of her window and pulled on a rope, at the end of which dangled a waste-basket filled with bags, envelopes, and boxes. Below, in the snow, stood half a dozen sympathizers who had brought the "morning post" to their comrade, confined to her room with the German Measles.

Judging from the patient's alacrity in securing the basket she was not suffering. In fact she might have been called most indiscreet, as the morning air was cold. However, the flower of discretion does not bloom in boarding-school; and the afflicted Jean, after depositing the basket on the floor, and giving some air to the half-suffocated mice, leaned farther out of the window.

"Don't go. I'll look my mail over later. It's fine of you to come. Any more caught?"

"Yes, Bess Shepard has them for sure, and Elinor Brooks has a sore throat."

"Then she's probably just starting out."

"My room-mate is awfully cross without any reason." This from Vivian.

"Look behind her ears. Probably there are specks and lumps, too."

"Are you all over speckles, Jean?"

"Pretty much so!"

The patient appeared to listen, drawing herself farther into the room. All at once she waved a corner of her red bath-robe, a signal of danger, and slunk back toward the couch. The six sympathizers with one accord withdrew to the other side of the lilac bushes. They heard the closet door open and close, after something had been hurriedly placed therein, then foot-steps, and a peremptory rap on Jean's door. Then Jean's voice, pathetically lowered,

"Come in."

The door opened.

"Jeannette," said a voice, which they behind the lilac trees recognized as Miss Wood's. "Jeannette, don't you feel the draught from that open window?"

"No, thank you, Miss Wood. I need air."

"Didn't I hear you talking a moment since?"

"Perhaps," said the weary Jean with half-closed

eyes. "I recite a great deal to myself. And this morning I felt able to say a few words to some of the girls who came beneath the window."

"You must not talk, my dear. It is bad for your throat. Do you feel better this morning?"

"Yes, I think so, slightly, thank you."

Miss Wood smoothed with soft fingers the patient's head.

"You seem very cool — a good sign. How would some cream-toast taste? It's nourishing, and won't hurt your throat."

"Oh, it would be delicious, I'm sure. Thank you, Miss Wood. I really believe I'm a little hungry."

Miss Wood departed to make the toast, while her patient, quickly recovering, consumed buttered popcorn as an appetizer, hoping that cream toast would be agreeable to the white mice. After which, she once more lay down, and tried to look ill in time for Miss Wood's reappearance. Meanwhile the six behind the lilac trees hurried across the campus toward their respective cottages to do the weekly "tidying" of their rooms.

"Virginia," said Priscilla, as they left the others to post some letters, "I just know I'm going to have them. I was with Jean all one afternoon when

she was hating everybody. Oh, I hope you'll have them when I do!"

"So do I. 'Twould be fun having the girls bring mail from every one. And maybe Miss Wallace would make us cream toast. That would be worth the regular measles, not to mention German. You don't feel out-of-sorts yet, do you?"

"No, I'll tell you when I do, or you'll probably know anyway. Isn't Jean a scream? Probably she was in bed when Miss Wood got there."

"She's dear. Why don't she and Jess room together?"

"My dear, the whole faculty rose up in arms this year when they suggested it. They tried it exactly three weeks last year, and Miss Wood nearly resigned. One is bad enough, but the two are awful! They think up the most fearful things to do. Why, the summer before last, they'd been in England all summer, and had seen all kinds of new things. Well, the first thing they did when they got back to St. Helen's was to play chimney-sweep. Jess had seen them in London and she couldn't rest to see how it felt to be in a chimney. So, one day, she put on some black tights and an old Jersey of her brother's, and made a tall hat out of paste-board. Then they went up on the roof of Hathaway, and

Jean helped her get up on the chimney, and she dropped down. The chimney's wide, you know, and she dropped straight down, making an awful noise and loosening all the soot, right into the living-room fire-place. Miss King and Bishop Hughes were calling on Miss Wood just then, though, of course, Jess didn't know that. Down she came, feet first, into the grate, and scared Miss King and Miss Wood and the Bishop all but to death. She was all over soot, and was a sight! The Bishop laughs about it every time he comes."

Virginia laughed and laughed. As long as she had been at St. Helen's she had never heard that story.

"The thing that Jean's crossest about," Priscilla continued, "is the Gordon dance on Washington's Birthday. Her cousin asked her to come, and she's afraid Miss Wood won't let her go."

"Why, she'll be all right by then, won't she? The speckles are most gone already, and the dance is two weeks off."

"I know, but Miss Wood is very careful, and, besides, Jess told her that Jean was subject to tonsillitis. Oh, dear, I was sort of hoping that Carver Standish would invite me! You see, I've never been to a really big dance in the evening in my life. But

I guess he's not going to. Jean got her invitation yesterday."

But when they reached The Hermitage and their own room, Priscilla found the coveted envelope, with a card bearing the name "Carver Standish III," and a note saying it would be "downright rotten," if anything prevented her coming. Priscilla ran at once to ask for Miss Wallace's chaperonage, but, when she returned, a worried expression had replaced the joyous one on her face.

"Won't she go with you?"

"Yes, she'll go; but, Virginia, I just remembered the German Measles. They don't look so much like a blessing as they did a few minutes ago. What if I do get them? Oh, Virginia, what if I do? If I'm going to have them, I wish I'd get them right away, and then I'd be all over them in a week. Isn't there some way they can be hurried up if they're inside of you?"

Virginia was for a few moments lost in contemplation. Then apparently she remembered.

"Why, of course, there is," she said. "I remember all about it now. If they're really inside of you, hot things will bring them out. When they thought I had the mumps once, Hannah said 'Steam them out, dear. If they're there, they'll come.'

And they did come out. I've heard Hannah say that over and over again. Don't you worry, Priscilla. We'll use all the hot things we know, and try to bring them out, and, if they don't come, you can be reasonably sure they're not inside of you. If I were you, I'd begin right off. I'd put on a sweater, and sit over the register. I'd just bake! To-night we'll get extra blankets and hot water bottles, and in a day or two I believe we'll have them out. It's lucky to-morrow is Sunday."

"I just know they're inside," wailed Priscilla, buttoning her sweater, as she sat over the register. "My! It's hot here! Would you think of hot things, too? You know we said we believed that thoughts were powerful."

"I certainly *do* believe it. Yes, I believe I'd let my mind dwell on Vesuvius and the burning of Rome, and things like — like crematories and bonfires and the Equator. If there's anything in thought suggestion that certainly will help. It won't harm anyway. Are you awfully uncomfortable?"

"Very hot. Would you really stay here all the afternoon?"

"Yes, I would, and most of to-morrow. If, by to-morrow night, there aren't any signs, I'll believe the danger's past. Let's not tell anybody what we're

doing. If Miss Wallace thought you expected them, she might think you ought not to go."

"Does Hannah know all about sickness?"

"She certainly does. Why, everybody for miles around comes to her for advice, and trusts her just as though she were a doctor. Really, Priscilla, I know she'd do just this way if she were here."

The reassured Priscilla sweltered over the register most of the afternoon. When evening came, she was somewhat out-of-sorts. "Maybe the hating everybody has begun," thought her room-mate as she filled hot water-bottles. They had borrowed all in The Hermitage, except Miss Wallace's and Miss Baxter's (Miss Baxter was Miss Green's more popular successor) — much to the unsatisfied wonder of the household. Priscilla turned uneasily all night in a nest of hot water-bottles and extra blankets. In the morning there were no signs of measles, except perhaps a somewhat peevish disposition.

"And that's not measles, Virginia, I'll have you to know!" the owner of the disposition announced fretfully. "It's just from being burned alive! Now, I'm not going to do another thing, so you might just as well put away those two suits of underwear. One's enough!"

"Well," said Virginia a little doubtfully, as she

folded the extra suit and replaced it in the drawer; "well, it does seem as though if they'd been coming they would have come after all that steaming. I wish Hannah were here! She'd know. But, if I were you, Priscilla, I'd just keep thinking I wasn't going to have them. That will probably help."

This prescription compared to the preceding one was easy to follow, and all through the next two weeks Priscilla, when she remembered it, maintained that she was *not* to have the German Measles! For the rest of the time, which was by far the larger portion, she was perfectly oblivious as to even the possibility of her having them, so elated was she over her preparation for the Gordon dance. She and Miss Wallace and Jean Blackmore, who was really to be allowed to go after all, were to make the journey, a distance of twenty-five miles, by automobile. The two weeks dragged their days slowly along, but at last Thursday night arrived, and Priscilla, with a happy heart, surveyed for the last time that day her new dress, which her mother had sent from home.

"Just one more night to wait," she said, as she got into bed. "Oh, Virginia, I wish you were a Junior! I don't see why Miss King won't let new girls go. Carver said if you only could, he would

have asked you, because his grandfather had told him so much about you, and his room-mate, Robert Stuart, whom I've met, would have asked me. Then we could have gone together."

"I don't mind. It's been such fun getting you ready. Maybe next year we'll both go. Isn't it the luckiest thing you haven't had them at all?"

"It certainly is! It just shows how powerful thought is! Really, I have more faith in it than ever. You see, if they *were* inside of me, they didn't get any attention, and probably decided not to come out."

"Well, if they'd been there, they would have come out with all that heat, I'm sure," said Virginia, still faithful to Hannah. "But it doesn't matter whether they were there or not, just so long as they're not here. Good-night."

In the gray early morning Virginia was rudely awakened by some one shaking her. She sat up in bed to find Priscilla desperately shaking her with one hand and the witch-hazel bottle with the other. Priscilla was apparently in trouble. What could be the matter? She sat up, dazed, half-asleep.

"Why, what is it? What's the matter? Was the dance lovely? Did you have a good time?"

At these last remarks Priscilla wept.

"Oh, wake up!" she cried. "It's only Friday. I haven't been to the dance at all, and probably I can't go, because I've got them; yes, I have! My head aches, and my throat's sore, and I'm hot, and my eyes run, and I hate everybody, and I'll be lumpy and speckled right away — I *know* I shall! Oh, what shall I do?"

The last sentence ended in a long, heart-broken wail, which brought the still dazed Virginia thoroughly to her senses. She sprang from bed, turned on the light, and scrutinized the disconsolate Priscilla. Yes, her cheeks were most assuredly flushed, and her eyes were watery — from tears. Virginia was mistress of the situation.

"Now, Priscilla," she commanded, "you go back to bed. You're *going* to that dance. Remember that! I've got an idea. If heat will bring the things out, then cold must keep them in, of course. We'll fill the hot water-bottles with cold water, and turn off the heat, and you'll feel better. See if you don't. And you won't get speckled to-day anyway, because Jean Blackmore didn't till two days after they started; and even if you do behind your ears it won't matter. Stop crying, or somebody'll hear, and tell Miss Wallace you're sick."

This dire threat soothed the agitated Priscilla, and

she consented to the cold bags, which felt good against her hot cheeks and forehead. By breakfast time she did feel better, though still not very well; and she went to classes with injunctions from Virginia to return after each one and lie down fifteen minutes in a cold room until time for the next class. Thus the morning passed. In the afternoon, Virginia tacked an "Asleep" sign on the door, and commenced more rigorous treatment. The numerous hot water-bags were again collected, this time filled with cold water, and placed around the recumbent patient. An ice-bag, surreptitiously filled from the pitcher in the dining-room, adorned her aching head, and a black bandage covered her watery eyes. The poor child's thoughts, when she had any, were directed toward Eskimos and the Alps, and "such things as refrigerators, sherbet, and icebergs." For the sake of atmosphere, her room-mate read "Snowbound" to her.

But all in vain. They did *not* stay in! By supper time unmistakable speckles were apparent behind two very red ears, as well as elsewhere. Priscilla's cheeks were hot and flushed Her eyes were watery, and her head ached; but her spirit was undaunted.

"My dear, you don't look well," Miss Wallace

said anxiously, as they left the dining-room, and went to dress. "Are you sure you're well?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Wallace. I'm just hot because I'm excited. My cheeks always get red then What time does the machine come?"

"In an hour, I think. You're sure you're all right, Priscilla?"

"Oh, yes, thank you!" Priscilla spoke hastily, and hurried away before Miss Wallace should feel called upon to examine her too closely. "Come on, Virginia, and help me dress."

Miss Wallace went to her room, a trifle anxious. Strange to say, she did not once think of German Measles. No more cases had appeared, to St. Helen's relief; and apparently the epidemic had been confined to three unfortunates. Priscilla was probably, as she said, a little over-excited; and Miss Wallace had been in that state herself. There was doubtless not the least cause for alarm, and, reassured, she began to dress.

Meanwhile, behind a mysteriously locked door, the anxious Virginia was dressing her room-mate, who showed unmistakable evidences of further speckling, and whose determination alone kept her from crawling into bed, where she most assuredly belonged.

"Don't you feel a single bit better, dear?"

"Oh, yes, I guess so — I don't know. I feel sort of loose inside, as though I weren't connected. But I'll feel better driving over. Oh, Virginia, talcum powder my ears. They're perfect danger signals. *Is* that a speckle on my neck? Oh, say it isn't!"

"Of course, it isn't! It's only a wee pimple. I'll talcum powder it, too. There! You look just lovely! Shan't I let the others in now? They're cross as hops, because we've both been so secret, and we don't want to rouse suspicion."

Priscilla assented, and Virginia unlocked the door to the house in general.

"Too bad you're so exclusive!"

"Even if we're not asked, we might see the fun of getting ready."

"You look perfectly heavenly, Priscilla!"

"It's a love of a dress!"

"Mercy, Priscilla, what makes your ears so red?"

"I'll bet you've gotten them frost-bitten!"

"They certainly look it!"

"Your cheeks are red, too, but it's becoming!"

"What makes your eyes shine so?"

Here the uneasy Virginia felt as though a reply were necessary.

"Why, because she's happy, of course. You act

just like Red Riding Hood talking to the wolf, Dorothy."

Fortunately, just when inquiries were becoming too personal, Jean Blackmore entered, and claimed attention.

"Jean, you're actually pretty!"

"You really are, Jean."

"Thank you. I'm sure that's nice of you."

"That light green certainly is becoming. It makes you look like an apple-blossom."

"You lucky things! Wish we were going! Here's the machine now, and Miss Wallace is calling."

They went down-stairs, the house following.

"Oh, Miss Wallace, take your coat off, and let us see! Oh, please do!"

The obliging Miss Wallace complied. She really was charming in old blue, with half-blown, pale pink roses, Priscilla's gift, at her waist.

"Oh, Miss Wallace, you look just like a girl!"

"You're just beautiful, Miss Wallace!"

"No one will think you're a chaperon."

"They'll all want to dance with you, Miss Wallace."

"Oh, girls, you'll quite spoil me," said the chaperon, and looked more charming than ever.

"Come, girls. Priscilla, do raise your coat collar. I'm afraid you've caught cold. Jean, I insist, put on that scarf. Take care of the house, girls. Miss Baxter's out. But I know you will. Good-night."

The car rolled away into the darkness, and the girls went up-stairs, talking things over as they went.

"Isn't Miss Wallace the sweetest thing?"

"Something's the matter with Priscilla. She wasn't talking. What is it, Virginia?"

"Oh, she's excited, and perhaps — perhaps, she doesn't feel exactly well." Virginia felt more free, now that Priscilla was safely on her way.

. . . . . .

At the Gordon school all was excitement. Boys in white trousers waited impatiently at the gates, as the automobiles and carriages approached, to greet their friends and conduct them to the brilliantly lighted and beautifully decorated gymnasium. This annual dance on Washington's Birthday was the one real social function, outside Commencement, allowed at Gordon, and its importance was greatly felt by the young hosts.

Priscilla, strangely shivery, tried to reply easily to Carver's remarks, as they went up the walk toward the gymnasium.

"Isn't it lucky you didn't catch those things? I was dead scared you would when you wrote me."

"Yes, it's — it is lucky."

"My! Your cheeks are red, Priscilla. Just the way they used to be after swimming. Say, but you're looking great!"

"Am I?"

"Isn't Bob Stuart a corker? He decorated the whole gym. Never saw flags look any better, did you?"

"No, it's awfully pretty. I — I think I'll sit down, Carver, till dancing begins."

"Sure. Of course. I'll run and get Bob. He has three with you. Excuse me just a moment."

How Priscilla ever managed to dance the ten dances before intermission, she never knew. Her cheeks grew redder, her eyes brighter, her poor head spun as though never-ending wheels, eternally wound up, were to whirl around forever. Sometimes the lights of the gymnasium blurred, and something sang in her ears; but still she smiled and moved her feet. At the end of each dance when her charge was returned to her to await the arrival of her partner for the next, Miss Wallace grew more and more anxious.

"Priscilla dear, I'm sure you're ill. What is it?"

"Really, Miss Wallace, I've just a headache. Oh, don't make me stop, please!"

But at intermission — that blessed time when one could rest and close her eyes when nobody looked her way — at intermission while they sat in Carver's study and ate ice-cream and cake, Priscilla all at once gave a little worn-out sigh, and fainted quite away. Poor Carver Standish III was all consternation. Had he tired her out? Hadn't there been enough air in the room? Had he done anything he shouldn't? He plied Miss Wallace with anxious questionings while a guest, who by good fortune happened to be a doctor, bent over Priscilla.

But Priscilla, coming to herself just then, answered his questions.

"No, you haven't done a thing, Carver. It's the German Measles. They wouldn't stay frozen in!"

Then, to the greatly amused doctor, and to the greatly disturbed Miss Wallace, and the greatly relieved Carver, the patient told in a weak little voice of how they had tried two weeks ago to steam them out; and how, when they had unexpectedly come that morning, they had, with doubtful logic, striven

to freeze them in. The doctor, though he looked grave, laughed as though he never could stop; and it all ended by his taking her and Miss Wallace home in his own machine, leaving Jean to be chaperoned by her aunt, and a sympathetic but indignant host, who thought they ought to let him go along.

Virginia, who had read too late, and who even at bed-time felt called upon to inscribe some thoughts in her book, was startled at eleven o'clock by hearing foot-steps in the hall. Her door was unceremoniously opened by a tall, gray-haired gentleman, who carried in his arms a limp figure in a pink dress — a figure, who cried in a muffled voice from somewhere within the scarfs that covered her:

"Oh, Virginia, 'twas no use. They came out all the same!"

"So this is the other member of the new medical school," announced the gray-haired man, depositing his bundle on the bed. "Miss Virginia, I'm honored to meet you!"

The mystified and frightened Virginia was led away to Miss Wallace's room, where she gleaned some hurried information before that lady returned to help the doctor, who assured them that Priscilla would be much improved and doubtless much more

speckled in the morning. An hour later he drove away, leaving sweet Miss Bailey, St. Helen's nurse, in charge.

But the contrite and troubled Virginia could not sleep until she had been permitted to say a short good-night to her room-mate.

"Oh, Priscilla," she moaned. "I'm so sorry! I thought 'twas just the right thing to do."

"It was," said the patient from under the blankets, for a return to steaming had been prescribed. "It was, Virginia! Else I never could have gone, and I wouldn't have missed the one half I had for the world. Only I've just thought of the awful result! I've probably given them to Carver and all the others; and he'll never invite me again! Oh, why didn't we think?"

Virginia, by this time weeping in sympathy, was again led away to Miss Wallace's room, where she spent a restless night, thinking of the awful consequences to Colonel Standish's grandson. But both she and Priscilla might have spared themselves unnecessary worry, for the solicitous Carver telephoned daily for a week, and sent some flowers and two boxes of candy. A few days after the telephone calls had ceased, the fully restored Priscilla received the following note:

"GORDON SCHOOL, MAR. 1, 19—.

"DEAR PRISCILLA:

"I've got them, and so has Bob, and the four other fellows you danced with. Don't mind, because we're all jolly well pleased. Old Morley, who is a good sort, let us out of the February exams. and we're some happy, I tell you. Besides, grandfather sent me all kinds of new fishing-tackle, and ten dollars. We all think you were no end of a game sport to come, and next year Bob and I are going to have you and Virginia, whom grandfather's always cracking up to me.

"Your speckled friend,

"CARVER STANDISH."

CHAPTER XIV

WYOMING HOSPITALITY

THE March days came hurrying on — gray and wind-blown and showery — but rather merry for all that. All signs bore tokens of an early spring. A flock of geese had already gone over, crows were flapping across St. Helen's snow-freed meadow, and robins and song-sparrows felt quite at home. There was a misty, indistinct blur in the tops of the maple trees, quite as though wet buds were swelling. Under the pine trees by the Retreat, tiny, furry heads were peeping above the needles, hepaticas just awakening. The waters of the brook, freed from ice, tore boisterously through the meadow; and along its weedy edges the water-rats, having left their tunnels in the banks, scurried on secret, silent errands. Everywhere there was a strange fragrance of freshly-washed things — soft brown earth, buds ready to burst, tender shoots of plants. Yes, spring was unmistakably near, and the St. Helen's girls were ready for its coming.

It was on a Saturday afternoon, the last in March, that Virginia walked alone down the hill, through the pine woods, and across the road to the pastures and woodlands opposite. She would have loved company, but Priscilla, Lucile, and the Blackmore twins were playing tennis finals in the gym, the Seniors were enjoying an afternoon tea, Vivian was nowhere to be found, and, in the hope of persuading Dorothy to go with her, she had again interrupted a secret conference between Dorothy and Imogene, which conferences, to the watchful and troubled Vigilantes, were becoming more and more frequent. The whole campus seemed deserted, she thought, as she started from The Hermitage. Perhaps, the opening of the "Forget-me-not" soda fountain — another sign of spring — accounted for that.

It was wet underfoot and gray overhead, but she did not mind. She was bound for the pastures on the other side of the road leading to Hillcrest, for there Miss Wallace had said she might even this early find the mayflowers of which her mother had so often told her. As she went along, jumping over the little spring brooks and pools in the hollows, she thought of how spring was also coming to her own dear country. Her father's letter that morning had

told her of budding quaking-asps, of red catkins on the cottonwoods, of green foot-hills, and of tiny yellow butter-cups and the little lavendar pasque-flowers, which came first of all the spring blossoms. In a few weeks more those foot-hills would be gay with violets and spring beauties, anemones and shooting-stars.

She crawled between the gray, moss-covered bars of a fence which separated the two pastures, and went toward some deeper woodland where pines and firs grew. Here, Miss Wallace said, she would be likely to find them. She looked sharply for brown, clustered leaves, which always deceived one as to the wealth beneath them. At last on a little mossy knoll, in a clearing among the pines, she found what she sought. Kneeling eagerly on the damp ground, she searched with careful fingers through the brown leaves. Green leaves revealed themselves. She smelled the sweetest fragrance imaginable — the fragrance of flowers and brown earth and fresh leaves all in one. She looked beneath the green leaves; and there, with their pale pink faces almost buried in the moss, she found the first mayflowers of the spring.

Tenderly she raised the tendrils from the moss and grass, and examined the tiny blossoms, in whose

centers the hoar frost of winter seemed to linger. These then were the flowers her New England mother had so loved. Years before, perhaps in this very spot, her mother had come to search for them. She almost hated to pluck them — they looked so cozy lying there against the brown earth, but she wanted to send them to her grandmother for her mother's birthday. On other knolls and around the gray pasture rocks, even at the foot of the fir trees, she found more buds and a few opened blossoms. Her mother had long ago taught her Whittier's "Song to the Mayflowers," and she said some of the verses which she still remembered, as she sat beneath the trees, and pulled away the dead leaves from the flowers' trailing stems.

"O sacred flowers of faith and hope,
As sweetly now as then
Ye bloom on many a birchen slope,
In many a pine dark glen.

"Behind the sea-wall's rugged length,
Unchanged, your leaves unfold,
Like love behind the manly strength
Of the brave hearts of old.

"So live the fathers in their sons,
Their sturdy faith be ours,
And ours the love that overruns
Its rocky strength with flowers."

For an hour she roamed about the woods, finding evergreen to line her box for the flowers, and some cheery partridge vine, whose green leaves and red berries seemed quite untouched by the winter's snow. It was quiet in among the trees. She was glad after all that she had come alone. At school one needed to be away from the girls once in a while just to get acquainted with oneself.

She climbed upon a great gray rock in the open pasture, and sat there thinking of the months at St. Helen's — remembering it all from the day she had left her father. She was glad that she had come — glad that in her father's last letter he had said she was to return after a summer at home. Priscilla was to return, too, a Senior — perhaps, she would be monitor like Mary — and they were to room together as they had this year. The Blackmore twins had petitioned for Mary and Anne's room, promising upon their sacred honor to be models of behavior; and Miss King and Miss Wallace were considering their request. Virginia did hope it would be granted, for she loved Jess and Jean dearly. Dorothy would return. Would Imogene, too, she wondered? It might be mean to hope that she would not, but she did hope that.

From the rock where she sat a portion of the Hill-

crest road was visible. She was still thinking of Imogene and Dorothy, when a red and a white sweater appeared on the distant road moving in the direction of St. Helen's. "Dorothy and Imogene on the way home from Hillcrest," she thought to herself. They were walking very close together, apparently reading something, for Virginia could see something white held between them. All at once they stopped, looked up and down the road, and then disappeared among the bushes that edged the roadside. Virginia was about to call them, thinking perhaps they had seen her, and were coming through the pastures to where she was; but before she had time even to call, they reappeared, and walked more hurriedly toward the school. This time they were not close together, and the paper had disappeared.

The founder of the Vigilantes, perplexed by this strange behavior, did not move until the two girls had turned into the driveway of St. Helen's. Then she jumped from the rock. She would go back across the pastures to the gate which she had entered, then turn down the road and investigate. She felt like a true Vigilante, indeed! Something was in the air! She had felt it the moment she discovered Imogene and Dorothy in secret conference.

Perhaps, in the roadside bushes she would find the solution. Had the girls been Mary and Anne, Virginia would never have questioned. Moreover, she would have felt like a spy in suspecting their behavior. But Imogene had long given good cause for righteous suspicion; and were not the Vigilantes pledged to guard against evil-doers?

She hurried across the pastures. The sun, which had been out of sight all day, now at time of setting shone out clear and bright and was reflected in every little pool. She reached the gate, closed it behind her, and was about to turn down the road, when she saw sitting on a rock by St. Helen's gate a weary, worn-looking woman with a child. Something in the woman's expression made Virginia forget the errand upon which she was bent. She looked more than discouraged — almost desperate. The little girl by her side sat upon a shabby satchel, and regarded her mother with sad, questioning eyes. There was something about them so lonely and pathetic that Virginia's eyes filled with quick tears. She crossed the road and went up to them.

"Are — are you in any trouble?" she asked hesitatingly. "Can I help you?"

The woman in turn hesitated before she answered. But this young lady was apparently not like the

two who had passed her but a moment before. She looked at her little girl, whose tired eyes were red from crying. Then she answered Virginia.

"I'm in a deal of trouble," she said slowly. "I've been sick, and we've spent our money; and because we were three months back on the rent, we were turned out this morning. I'm looking for work — any kind will do — and I came to Hillcrest because I was hoping to get it at the school there. I've heard tell of how Miss King is very kind; but the two young ladies, who passed here just a few minutes ago, said there was no work there at all. I guess they didn't have much time for the likes of me. Do you go there, too?"

"Yes," said Virginia. "But they don't know whether there's any work or not at St. Helen's. I don't know either; but I know Miss King would like to find some for you if she could. Anyway, I want you to come to our cottage to supper with me. You are my guests — you and — what is the little girl's name?"

"Mary. And I'm Mrs. Michael Murphy. But, miss, you don't mean come to supper with you? You see, we ain't fit."

"Yes, you are perfectly fit. Saturday night no

one dresses up. Please come, and then you can see Miss King after supper. You'd like to come, wouldn't you, Mary?"

Poor little Mary cared not for etiquette. Besides, she was plainly hungry. She pulled her mother's dress.

"Please go, mother. Please!"

Virginia smiled at her eagerness. "Of course you'll come, Mrs. Murphy. My name's Virginia — Virginia Hunter. Let me help with your satchel, please. Come on, Mary."

With one hand she helped Mrs. Murphy with the satchel, while she gave the other to Mary, and they started up the hill — Virginia never once thinking that her new friends would not be as welcome guests as those who were often bidden to The Hermitage, Mary, untroubled by conventions and happy at the thought of supper, Mrs. Michael Murphy, secretly troubled, but compelled to snatch at any hope of work.

"You're not from these parts, I take it from your talk," Mrs. Murphy remarked as they neared the campus.

"No, I'm from Wyoming. It's a long way from here."

"You're sure — I'm afraid — the ladies at your

cottage mightn't like Mary and me coming this way."

"Please don't think that, Mrs. Murphy," Virginia reassured her. "We're always allowed to invite guests to supper. It's quite all right, truly."

But Mrs. Murphy in her secret heart was not assured. She looked really frightened as they neared The Hermitage; but Virginia, talking with Mary, did not notice, nor did she heed the astonished and somewhat amused looks of the girls whom they passed.

The supper-bell was ringing just as they opened the door, and stepped into the living-room. Mary and Anne were at the piano, and Virginia beckoned to them, and introduced her new friends. The surprised Mary and Anne managed to bow and smile; and were frantically searching for topics of conversation, when the girls began to come down-stairs, just as Miss Wallace, with Miss King, who was staying to supper, opened the door of Miss Wallace's room.

Poor Mrs. Michael Murphy was perhaps the most uncomfortable of them all, for the others were mainly surprised. The girls stared, Imogene and Dorothy giggled audibly, Miss King looked puzzled, Miss Wallace sympathetic. Virginia could not un-

derstand the manifest surprise, mingled with disapproval, on the faces around her. Could she have done anything wrong? They certainly would not think so, if they knew.

"Mary," she said, "will you please introduce my friends to the girls, while I speak a moment with Miss King and Miss Wallace?"

Mary, who began to see through the situation, managed to introduce the painfully embarrassed Mrs. Murphy and shy little Mary to girls who, with the exception of Imogene, responded civilly enough. Cordiality certainly was lacking, but that was largely due to surprise. Meanwhile, Virginia had explained matters to Miss King and Miss Wallace, who, when they heard the story, lost their momentary astonishment in sympathy. Of course such a proceeding was slightly out of the course of ordinary events at The Hermitage; but Virginia's thoughtfulness, though perhaps indiscreet, was not at the present to be criticised. They came forward and shook hands heartily with the guests, much to Virginia's comfort. It must be all right after all, she concluded.

Mrs. Murphy laid off her hat and shawl, Virginia took Mary's coat and hood, and the family and guests passed to the supper table. Conversation languished that evening. The girls talked among them-

selves, but only infrequently. Even Miss Wallace and Miss King apparently found it difficult to think of topics for general conversation. But Virginia, true to her duties as hostess, chatted with Mrs. Michael Murphy, until the embarrassed, troubled little woman partially regained her composure. As for little Mary, she was fully occupied in devouring the first square meal she had had for days.

But Virginia was not unconscious of the atmosphere. Something was wrong. Perhaps, after all, Mrs. Murphy had been right when she said the ladies of The Hermitage mightn't like to have her and Mary coming this way. She could not understand it. At home in Wyoming the stranger was always made a friend, and the unfortunate a guest. Hospitality was the unwritten law of the land.

She was rather glad when supper was over. The girls immediately went up-stairs, only Mary, Anne, and Priscilla lingering to say good-night to her guests. Virginia stayed upon Miss King's invitation, for she and Miss Wallace were to talk with Mrs. Murphy concerning work at St. Helen's. Little Mary, tired out but satisfied, fell asleep, her head in Virginia's lap. To Virginia's joy, and to the unspeakable gratitude of Mrs. Michael Murphy,

whom the world had used none too kindly, Miss King decided that St. Helen's needed just such a person to do repairing and mending; and Mrs. Murphy, her face bright with thankfulness, was installed that very evening in her new and comfortable quarters.

An hour later, Virginia, the supper table atmosphere almost forgotten in her glad relief over Mrs. Murphy's immediate future, ran up-stairs and down the hall to her own room. The door opposite opened a little, and some one said in a biting voice:

"I suppose, Miss Hunter, we entertain Wyoming cow-boys before long?"

In Virginia's eyes gleamed a dangerous light, but she answered quietly:

"I'm afraid not, Miss Meredith. The Wyoming cow-boys whom I know are accustomed to eat with ladies."

Still, her delight over Mrs. Murphy's freedom from care could not quite banish the feeling of puzzled sadness with which she wrote these words in her "Thought Book":

"The world is a very strange place. God may be no respecter of persons, but people are. It is a very sad thing to be obliged to believe, but I am afraid it is true."

The next morning the two Vigilantes, obtaining permission to walk to church a little earlier than the others, stopped by the roadside at the spot where yesterday Virginia had noted suspicious behavior, and thoroughly investigated. A rough path had apparently been recently broken through the alders. At the end of the path by the fence stood a big, white birch, and on the smooth side of the birch farthest from the road were many pin-pricks. One pin remained in the tree, and it still held a tiny scrap of white paper, apparently the corner of a sheet, the rest of which had been hurriedly torn away. The Vigilantes, thinking busily, went on to church. It is needless to say that they found it difficult to listen to the morning's sermon.

CHAPTER XV

VESPER SERVICE

THE Sunday following the Vigilantes' mysterious discovery by the roadside, and immediately preceding the Easter holidays, was Palm Sunday. It dawned beautiful — warm and sunny as a late spring day — and as the hours followed one another, each seemed more lovely than the last. Song sparrows sang from budding alder bushes, and robins flew hither and thither among the elms and maples, seeking suitable notches in which to begin their homes. As if by magic, purple and golden crocuses lifted their tiny faces on the southern sides of the cottage lawns; and the buds of the lilac trees, warmed and encouraged by yesterday's showers, burst into leaf before one's very eyes.

The world seemed especially joyous to the girls, as they roamed the woods in search of wild flowers, or sought about the campus for fresh evidences of spring. The long winter months had gone; Easter home-going was but five days away; and when they returned after two weeks at home, spring would have

really come, bringing with it all the joys and festivities and sadnesses of the Commencement season.

At four o'clock, as the westward-moving sun gleamed through the pines, and fell in wavering lights and shadows on the brown needles beneath, they gathered for their vesper service, coming from all directions, their hands filled with pussy-willows, hepaticas, and mayflowers, their faces glowing with health and happiness, in their eyes the old miracle of the spring. To Virginia, as to many of the others, this Sunday afternoon hour was the dearest of the week. She loved the gray-stone, vine-covered Retreat, and its little chapel within; she loved the sound of its organ, and the voices of the girls singing; and most of all, she loved the little talks which Miss King gave on Sunday afternoons — dear, close, helpful talks of things which she had learned, and by which she hoped to make life sweeter for her girls.

To-day the chapel was especially lovely, for the altar rail was banked with palms, Easter lilies stood upon the white-covered altar, and the sun, shining through the high, narrow windows, flooded all with golden light. Virginia sat between Dorothy and Priscilla, holding a hand of each. It was so lovely to be there together! In her secret heart she was

glad that Imogene's mother had sent for her to come home the day before, for when Imogene was away Dorothy seemed to belong again to them.

Since St. Helen's held no Easter service, as the girls were always at home, Miss King spoke to-day of Easter — how it had always seemed to her the real beginning of the New Year; how it signified the leaving off of the old and the putting on of the new; how it meant the awakening of new thoughts, and the renewed striving after better things.

"So, if we could only understand," she said in closing, while the girls listened earnestly, "that Easter is far more than a commemoration, that it is a condition of our hearts, then we should, I think, reverence the day rightly. For as beautiful as is the story of the risen Christ, we do not keep Easter sacred merely by the remembrance of that story. The risen Christ is as nothing to us unless in our own hearts the Christ spirit rises — the spirit of love and service, of unselfishness and goodness. When that spirit awakens within us, then comes our Easter day. It may be many days throughout the year; it might be — if we could only rightly appreciate our lives — it might be every day. For every day is a fresh beginning, an Easter day, when

we may decide to cast off the old and to put on the new, the old habits of selfishness and jealousy, of insincerity and thoughtlessness — all those petty little things that mar our lives; and to put on our new and whiter robes of unselfishness and simple sincerity. If the thousands who next Sunday morning will sing of the risen Christ, might all experience within themselves their own Easter mornings, then this world of ours would have realized its resurrection.

"Let the hepaticas which you hold in your hands give you the only Easter lesson worth the learning — the lesson which your pagan forefathers in the forests of Germany taught their children centuries ago on their own Easter festival. You know how each spring the clusters beneath the pines are larger, if you are careful as you pick the blossoms not to disturb the roots. The long months of fall and winter are not months of sleep and rest for the hepaticas. Beneath the snow in the winter silence they are at work, sending out their rootlets through the brown earth, avoiding the rocks and sandy places, but taking firm hold upon that which will nourish them best. Thus do they grow year by year, at each Easter time showing themselves larger and more beautiful than the spring before.

"This is the Easter lesson which I wish you girls might all take to yourselves. As in the winter silence of the earth, the hepaticas send out their rootlets toward the best soil, so in the silence of your own inner lives are you here and now also sending out rootlets, either toward the soil which will give you a healthful, wholesome growth, or toward the barren places where you must cease to grow. Avoid the rocks of indolence and evil influence, the waste places of selfishness; but reach far out for the good, wholesome soil of good books, of a love and knowledge of the out-of-doors, of friends who make you better, of study which will enrich your lives. And as the flowers find themselves more firmly rooted year by year, so will you find yourselves growing in strength and self-control, in sincerity and firmness of purpose. Then, and only then, will you experience the real Easter — the awakening to the realization in your hearts that you, through your own seeking, have found that better part, which can never be taken away from you."

In the silence that followed, while the organ played softly, Virginia touched with gentle fingers the tiny hepaticas in her lap. Was she sending out rootlets toward the right soil, she wondered? In

the years to come would people seek her, as she sought the hepaticas in the spring, because she had found that "better part"? "That is why we go to Miss King and Miss Wallace," she thought to herself, "because they have found the best soil, and have grown sweeter every year." And, deep in her heart, she resolved to try harder than ever to avoid the rocks and the sand, and to send her rootlets deep down into the soil which Miss King had described.

Then she heard Dorothy by her side ask if they might sing the hymn of her choosing, and they rose to sing words which somehow held to-day a new and deeper meaning:

> "Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
> Forgive our feverish ways;
> Re-clothe us in our rightful mind,
> In purer lives Thy service find,
> In deeper reverence, praise."

Silently they all passed out of the little chapel, and turned homeward. The sun, sinking lower, cast long shadows among the pines, and gilded with a farewell glow the chapel windows. Virginia, Priscilla, and Dorothy took the woodsy path that led to the campus. No one cared to talk very much. When they reached The Hermitage Dorothy went

with them to their room; and as they filled bowls of water for the tired little hepaticas, and arranged them thoughtfully, for they some way seemed more like persons than ever before, she said all at once—looking out of the window to hide her embarrassment:

"I just thought I'd tell you that I know I haven't been growing in very good soil this year; but I'm going to put out new roots now, and I'm not going to send them into sand either."

The two Vigilantes dropped the hepaticas and hugged Dorothy hard without saying a word. Then, with their arms around one another's shoulders, they stood by the western window, and watched the sun set behind the hills — happier than they had been for weeks.

CHAPTER XVI

A SPRING-TIME ROMANCE

"You don't mean you're going to back out now, Vivian, when we've made all arrangements, and you've promised to go?"

"I — I didn't say I was going to back out, Imogene. I just said I wished I hadn't promised. It doesn't seem nearly so much fun as it did, and, besides, I know I'll get caught!"

"Of course you will, if you lose your nerve like that. But if you do as we've planned, there isn't a chance in a thousand. No one will wonder why you're not at supper, because you're absent so often; and it will be easy enough to slip out while we're eating. Then by the time you're driving off, we'll all be at that Art lecture; and with the lights off and only the stereopticon, no one will miss you. And by the time we get home, you'll be here in bed. Why, it's as smooth as a whistle, and you ought to be everlastingly grateful to Dot and me for fixing it up for you. No other girl in St. Helen's has ever

gone out driving with a man, and you'll have the story to tell your children."

Poor Vivian looked for a moment as though she doubted her future children's pride in their mother's achievement; but she had long ago put her hand to the plow, and there seemed no turning back.

"Of course I'm going now that it's gone so far, and I've promised," she said desperately. "But I don't believe Dorothy thinks it's so much as she did. She said to-day she sort of wished we hadn't done it."

Imogene looked uncomfortable. Dorothy's strange disloyalty during the weeks since the Easter holidays had greatly disturbed her.

"Dot needn't act so righteous all of a sudden," she said bitterly. "I'd like to know who planned this whole thing if she didn't. I'd certainly never have thought of the birch tree post-office; and she's been mail-carrier more than half the time. It's a late day to back out now."

"She isn't backing out, Imogene. She only said she wished we hadn't planned it in the first place; but since we had, of course we'd have to see it through. I don't think you and she need worry anyway. It's I that's going to get the blame; and I shan't tell on you even if I am caught."

"Tell on us!" Imogene's tone was more biting than ever. "Well, I should hope you wouldn't! Who's superintended this thing, I'd like to know? Who's been bringing boxes of candy from him all the way up here to you, and running the risk of being caught? Who's been posting your notes for you all winter long?"

After listening to this exoneration, Vivian was on the point of tears, and Imogene, feeling that her room-mate's courage must be kept up at any cost, changed her tone.

"To-morrow you'll be laughing up your sleeve, and saying what a splendid time you had. Besides, think what fun it's been all along. We've fooled every one in school. No one has suspected a thing! And think of all the candy you've had. Of course, he'll have another box to-night."

The unhappy Vivian dried her tears, but her face did not brighten. In fact, she did not look at all like a person who was about to enjoy a long-anticipated evening drive.

"Imogene," she said, and there was an unusual tone of self-assertion in her voice, which surprised her room-mate, "Imogene, I want you to know that a hundred boxes of candy don't make one feel right inside."

While this conversation was taking place behind a closed door in The Hermitage, there was another person in the woods by the Retreat, who likewise did not feel right inside. The other person was Dorothy. She had declined Virginia's and Priscilla's invitation to go after violets, much as she would have liked to accept, in the hope of easing her conscience; curtly refused to walk with Imogene; and studiously sought to evade the accusing eyes of Vivian. Seizing her opportunity, she had run away from them all, and now sat alone under the pines by the Retreat, trying to think of a way out of her difficulty — a way that would save Vivian from the consequences of an act for which she was really not to blame.

Ever since September Dorothy had sent her rootlets into the waste places of indolence and poor companionship; and now that she had truly resolved to change it seemed to her discouraged heart almost too late. She and Imogene were to blame for the situation which confronted her — not Vivian. Ever since the sallow, white-coated Leslie had entered the employ of the "Forget-me-not," she and Imogene had directed susceptible Vivian's attention toward his evident admiration. It was they who had all through the winter and early spring transported his

gifts to Vivian; they, who, weary of the monotony which through idleness they made themselves, had seized upon Dorothy's idea of a secret post-office; and finally, they who had proposed through the means of the post-office that the enamored Leslie take Vivian for an evening drive. Now the crisis was at hand, and what could she do to avert it?

She sat in a wretched little heap beneath the pines, and thoroughly despised Dorothy Richards. She had made a failure of the whole year — in grades, in conduct, in character. The first was bad enough, for she knew that Mary was right. It was she who was helping The Hermitage lose the cup — the scholarship cup which it had determined to win from Hathaway. The second was worse, for she had forfeited Miss Wallace's confidence, and had aroused the righteous suspicion of the girls. But the last was worst of all! She had allowed herself to be weakly influenced by Imogene, had been disloyal to Priscilla and Virginia, had been very nearly dishonest, if not quite so, and had pitiably lost her own self-respect. And now, even though she was tired of it all, even though she desired deep in her heart to turn her rootlets into better soil, perhaps it was too late. Perhaps, after all, she was not strong enough.

A brown thrasher, who sat on her newly-made nest in a near-by thicket and watched the girl beneath the pines, wondered perhaps at the strange ways of mortals. For even though the sun was bright and the whole world filled with joy, this girl all at once burst into tears, and cried between her sobs:

"Oh, dear, what shall I do? I'll never be any different — never! And Priscilla and Virginia will never like me again when they know about to-night!"

But remorse, though quite appropriate under the circumstances, and doubtless likely to bear fruit in the future, was useless just at present. Dorothy soon realized that, and sat up again, much to the relief of the brown thrasher, who felt safer now that this strange person sobbed no more. A situation confronted her and must be met. Was there any way to save Vivian, and at the same time not implicate Imogene? Were Dorothy alone to blame, she would go to Miss Wallace and tell the whole story; but she knew that Miss Wallace had previously suspected Imogene with good cause, and she did not wish to run the risk of getting Imogene into further trouble, even though she might richly deserve it. Of course, Vivian might be easily per-

suaded to stay at home and not meet her knight-errant of the soda-fountain, who was to find her at seven o'clock by the birch tree; but that meant anger and certain revenge on the part of Imogene, besides the probability of the disappointed Leslie communicating his disappointment in such a way as would eventually reach the ears of some member of St. Helen's faculty.

The five-thirty warning bell found the question unsolved, and a sadly troubled Dorothy walked slowly homeward. She was purposely late to supper, for she did not wish to encounter Imogene or Vivian. As she left the wood-path and came out upon the campus, she saw hurrying down the hill a short, plump figure in a red sweater. Vivian, on the way to meet her knight!

At supper Dorothy tried in vain to eat the food upon her plate. Impossible schemes, each vetoed as soon as concocted, were born but to die. It was only when Priscilla and Virginia, excused early for tennis, left the table, that an inspiration seized her. Almost without waiting for Miss Wallace's nod of permission, she ran from the dining-room, flew up the stairs, and burst into Priscilla's and Virginia's room, where they, surprised, paused in the act of lacing their tennis shoes.

"Oh, Virginia," she cried, "go quick! Vivian will listen to you, and she won't to me, because I've been so mean. Oh, lace your shoes quickly! She is down by the birch tree, just beyond the gates on the road to Hillcrest, waiting for — for that silly Leslie, who's coming to take her to drive. And it's not her fault, because we — I mean I — put her up to do it. And you can hate and despise and detest me, if you want to, only hurry, and make him go away!"

The founder of the Vigilantes needed no further explanation. So this was the meaning of her discovery a month ago! She sprang to her feet, raced through the hall, down the stairs, and across the campus toward the road, while the contrite Dorothy remained to confess the whole miserable story to Priscilla. It was Friday evening and there was no study hour after supper, so that Virginia could leave The Hermitage without exciting surprise. Moreover, the girls in the cottages were all at supper, and there was no one to note her hurried flight down the hill. Dorothy had not said at what hour Vivian's cavalier would arrive, and there was no time to be lost. Even then they might be driving away. Almost out of breath she raced down the hill, through the pine woods, out the stone gates,

and into the main road. A quarter of a mile away, coming from the direction of Hillcrest, she saw a runabout, in which sat a solitary figure, who seeing her at that distance waved his hand as a signal.

"It's that silly thing!" breathed Virginia to herself. "He thinks I'm Vivian. Oh, I'm glad I'm not too late!"

She dashed down the road and into the rude path through the alders to the birch tree. There, at its base, hidden by the alders from the view of those who passed, crouched poor, trembling Vivian. She had half risen, as Virginia crashed through the bushes, thinking that her cavalier was approaching; but at the sight of the panting Virginia, she shrank back against the tree.

"Why — why, Virginia," she stammered. "Why — why, what do you want?"

Virginia was almost too breathless to answer.

"I've — come — to meet — your friend, Vivian," she managed to gasp. "He's coming now. He'll be here in a moment."

"I — I think I'm scared," gasped Vivian in her turn, shrinking farther back against the tree. "Aren't you, Virginia?"

"No," said her deliverer, gaining breath at every moment, "no, Vivian, I certainly am not scared.

I feel as brave as Theseus, though Leslie isn't much of a Minotaur, I must say!"

The sound of a horse's feet came nearer and nearer, then stopped. A carriage creaked as some one jumped from it; twigs snapped as some one came crashing through them. Vivian hugged the old tree for support, and turned her face toward the pasture. Virginia braced herself for the attack, her back against the tree, her arms folded Napoleon-wise, her head high, her eyes flashing. As the bushes parted and the soda-fountain clerk emerged and stepped into the trysting-place, a more surprised youth could not have been found in the State of Massachusetts.

Arrayed in a new and gallantly worn linen duster, his hat on the side of his head, a box of candy under one arm, he stood as though rooted to the spot, an amazed and sickly smile playing over his more sickly countenance. What had happened? Was he to escort two ladies instead of one? His eye-glasses, attached by a gold chain to his ear, trembled as his pale gaze, expressionless save for surprise, tried to encompass the figure who still embraced the tree. But all in vain, for ever he encountered a pair of flashing gray eyes, which, steady and disdainful, never once left his own.

"You may go now," said the owner of the eyes, after what seemed long minutes to the faithful Leslie, "and don't you ever come here again! This isn't a post-office any longer. You're too unspeakably silly for any use, and Vivian thinks so just the same as the rest of us. You belong to a soda-fountain, for you're just as sickish as vanilla ice-cream, and as senseless as soda-water. Now go!"

The subdued Leslie needed no second bidding. He went. They heard his hurrying feet crash through the roadside thicket, the creaking of his carriage as with one bound he leaped into it, and the crack of the whip, as he warned his steed to do no tarrying in that locality. Then Virginia turned her attention to Vivian who by this time was in an hysterical little heap at the foot of the big old tree.

"It's all right, Vivian," she said, with her arms around Vivian's shaking shoulders. "He's gone and he won't come back. He'll be in New York by midnight, if he keeps on going. Please don't cry any more."

But Vivian could not stop just then. To be sure, the result of her foolishness had been checked before it was too late; but nothing could blot out the

foolishness itself; and it was that which was breaking her heart.

"Oh, I'm not crying about him!" she said between her sobs. "I despise him! I'm crying because I've been so silly, and nobody'll ever forget it. I don't care what Dorothy and Imogene say. It's what's inside of me that hurts! And everybody'll know how silly I've been! Oh, why can't I be different than I am?"

"Everybody won't know, Vivian. Oh, please don't cry so! Nobody'll know except Priscilla and me, and we'll think all the more of you. And Dorothy feels worse than you, because she's been even more to blame. 'Twas she that told me, and made me come to help you."

Vivian stopped crying from sheer surprise. So Dorothy felt bad inside too, and had tried to help her. That was comforting.

"And as for Imogene," Virginia continued, "if she once dares to tease you for trying not to be foolish any more,— if she dares,— well, I shouldn't want to say what might happen!"

The distant sound of a bell rang through the still air.

"Now, Vivian, there's the lecture bell, and if we don't go, somebody *will* suspect. You'll feel better

inside, if you just make up your mind that you're not going to be silly any longer. I'm your true friend, and so is Priscilla; and, if you'll let us, we'll try to help you to — to find better soil for your roots, just the way we're trying to do."

So the world looked a little brighter to Vivian as she left the hated post-office and walked back toward St. Helen's with her "true friend's" arm around her. Perhaps, after all, if she tried hard, she might, some day, be a little different. As they turned into St. Helen's gateway, they met Dorothy and the Senior monitor, walking arm in arm. Dorothy's eyes were red from crying, and the face of the Senior monitor was stern, though it grew kind again as she came up to Vivian and Virginia.

"It's going to be all right, Vivian," she said, "and we're every one your friends. Don't you feel bad any more."

"And I'm going to begin all over again and be your friend, Vivian," said Dorothy, tears very near the surface again, "if you'll forgive me, and let me try. But if you won't, I'll never blame you, because I've been so frightfully miserable to you!"

But Vivian, feeling undeservedly rich, put her arm close around Dorothy, while Mary went to Virginia's side, and the four of them climbed the

hill toward St. Helen's together. There were yet fifteen minutes before the lecture, and those fifteen minutes were spent, with the addition of Priscilla in Imogene Meredith's room. The Senior monitor spoke more plainly than they had ever heard her speak before during that secret and never-to-be-forgotten session, and Imogene, for at least once in her life, felt with the fabulous barnyard fowls in the old tale, quite as though her "sky were falling." A week later, to the surprise of all St. Helen's, except perhaps the faculty, Mrs. Meredith arrived. She had decided to take Imogene to the mountains, she said, for the remainder of the year. Her health seemed failing, and she feared a nervous breakdown.

As for the chivalrous Leslie, the "Forget-me-not" knew him no more; for on the very day after his sudden departure from the trysting-place, when the girls went to Hillcrest to indulge in the inevitable Saturday afternoon sundae, they were served by a gray-haired stranger, who wore Leslie's coat with ease, but who looked unromantic in the extreme.

CHAPTER XVII

THE VIGILANTES INITIATE

"AD, ante, con, de, in, inter,—" recited Virginia. "Priscilla, do you always remember the difference between gerunds and gerundives now you're a Junior?"

"Always remember! Why, I *never* do! I think it's a point of ignorance to be proud of. It's depressing to remember so many *un*vital things. That's one."

Ten minutes' silence, punctuated by Priscilla's sighs over Cicero, and Virginia's whispered prepositions.

"The person who recommended Friday afternoon study hour must have been very inhuman."

"She was! 'Twas Greenie! We're studying now in blessed memory of her!"

"I wonder where she is."

"Oh, probably sitting on an Athenian rock-pile, and gazing at the Acropolis! I'm glad it's the Acropolis instead of me! Virginia, I can't study another second, and it isn't three o'clock for fifteen

minutes. You haven't shown me how you've changed the Constitution yet, and we're going to start at three. I don't see but that we both have to stop studying anyway, whether we choose to or not. We've just about time to read it over."

Virginia needed no urging. She closed the Latin Grammar, tore the afghan and pillows from her couch, and burrowed under the bed-clothes until she found what she sought — a somewhat rumpled piece of paper.

"This is the original, you know," she said. "I'm keeping it for my Memory Book, and I'll make a copy for yours. I made the new one different as we planned. I took out the 'evil influence' part, because there isn't any more need for that, and, of course, the names of those we were especially guarding. I don't think Dorothy and Vivian had best know about that, do you? It might make them feel a little queer to know we'd been watching them especially."

"No, we won't say anything about that part. They're going to be one of us now, and trying for the same thing. We'll keep the real reason for the founding of the order a secret, known to only the charter members. I'll never cease to be glad you thought of it, now that things have come out the way

they have. Isn't it splendid about Dorothy's grades? Mary said to-day that if Dorothy gets *A's* in everything all the quarter, the way she has ever since Easter, and every one else keeps up as well, we'll really have a chance of winning the cup from Hathaway."

"Vivian's doing splendidly, too. Miss Wallace read her theme in class to-day and complimented her, and Vivian looked so pleased. She's so quiet lately, and seems sad. I think she feels bad about Imogene. Priscilla, do you really suppose that—?" Virginia's voice was mysteriously lowered.

"Yes, I do," answered Priscilla in a whisper. "Of course, no one will ever know; but I'm sure Imogene didn't know her mother was coming, and we all know Imogene wasn't sick. Maybe Mary felt she *ought* to tell; or maybe Miss Wallace knew more than we thought all along. St. Helen's always does things quietly; but I'll always think that Imogene was — expelled!"

"Maybe Vivian knows, and that's why she feels so bad. And, besides, it's lonesome rooming all alone. I'll read you the new Constitution, and then we'll go and get them both. Where shall we go?"

"Let's choose the big rock just back of the Re-

treat, behind the pines. No one goes there very often, and we can have it for our meeting-place. Read on. It's five minutes to three now."

Virginia drew a less rumpled paper from her blouse pocket and read:

"We, the undersigned, on this 10th day of May, do hereby announce that we are the sole members of the Order of Vigilantes, a secret order founded on the 20th day of January last by Priscilla Alden Winthrop and Virginia Webster Hunter. We take our name from the Vigilantes of the West — those brave men, who in the early days of our Western States, bound themselves together in the endeavor to stand for fair play, and to preserve law and order. Like them, we hereby determine and promise to stand at all times for fair play and true friendship; and to help one another in every way we can to live up to the principles of our order. As stated above, we are the only real Vigilantes, though the existence of the order is known to Mary Williams, who is our adviser, when we need assistance."

"Now, we'll sign our names, Priscilla, and I'll take my fountain pen so that they can sign on the rock. Come on. It's after three now."

They went into the hall where they met Dorothy, who had agreed to keep the mysterious appointment with them at three o'clock, and together they went to get Vivian. But no response came to their knocking.

"That's queer. She can't be asleep. She said she'd be ready."

They knocked again — louder this time. Still there was no answer. Then they tried the door, and to their surprise found it locked.

"Why, where can she be? You don't suppose she's sick or something, do you?" asked Priscilla. "She wouldn't lock the door if she went out. Let's go around the porch and look in the windows."

They went into their room, and through the French windows on to the porch, Dorothy following. When they reached Vivian's room, they found the curtains lowered, though the windows were not locked. By dint of a good deal of prying, they raised the screens, windows and curtains, and stepped into the room. Then they stood and stared at one another in amazement. Vivian's trunk stood, packed, tagged, and locked in the middle of the floor; her pictures, posters, pennants, and other wall decorations had disappeared, as had the toilet articles from the dresser; only the pillow-laden couch

stood as before, though its afghan and pillows bore tags, on each of which was written, "For any one who wants it."

"Why, why, she's gone!" gasped Virginia, the first to speak. "Oh, we must stop her! What shall we do? Somebody think — quick!"

But in their sudden and complete surprise, thinking quickly was an utter impossibility. They probably would have remained staring at one another while precious time was hastening on, had not Priscilla's eyes, roving distractedly about the dismantled room, fallen upon an envelope on the top of the closed and locked desk.

"It's for you, Virginia," she cried, passing the envelope to her room-mate. "Oh, read it, quick!"

Virginia lost no time in tearing open the envelope and unfolding the paper within.

"'Dear Virginia,' she read in a trembling voice to those who listened, 'I know you'll all think I'm sillier than ever, but I can't stand being miserable any longer. You've all been good to me, especially you, and I'll never, *never, never* forget it, so long as I live! You're the best friend I ever had. (A sob from Dorothy.) But it is very hard to hate yourself every minute; and, besides, I can't forget

what Imogene said to me when she went away. So I'm going home, and maybe next year when people have forgotten my silliness, Miss King will let me come back. Perhaps, I'll be different then, but I can't promise; and maybe, after all, she won't let me come back, when she knows I've run away.

"'VIVIAN.

"'P. S. Please tell Miss Wallace I'm sorry I deceived her by telling her I had a headache, and asking if I could study in the woods. I did have a headache; and there wasn't any other way I could get the train without somebody finding out.

"'V. E. W.'"

Still they stood in poor, discouraged Vivian's deserted room, and looked at one another. Virginia's face was sad from sympathy, Priscilla looked puzzled and thoughtful, Dorothy was crying.

"Oh, it's my fault," she sobbed. "I ought to have gone away along with Imogene! I haven't been a friend to Vivian, and now I'll never have a chance!"

"Yes, you will, too," cried Priscilla, coming out of her reverie, "because she can't take the train after all. There isn't any three o'clock. It's been taken off. Miss Wallace told me so yesterday, when

she was thinking of going away for over Sunday. The next one doesn't go till five, and if Vivian's anywhere around, we'll find her and bring her back. Let's not say a word to any one, but just hunt till we find her. The door's locked and we can draw the curtains, and no one will ever know."

Without wasting any precious moments they hurried out the way they had entered, drawing the curtains before closing the windows and screens, ran down-stairs and across the campus to the road, running the gauntlet of all who called to them by maintaining a discreet and somewhat exclusive silence. At the top of the hill, Priscilla reviewed her forces.

"Let's each take a different direction. She's around the woods somewhere, because she wouldn't dare stay around Hillcrest for fear of meeting the girls, and there aren't any woods the other side of the village. I'll go north of the campus, and Dorothy, you take the Retreat woods, and Virginia, you cross the road by the gates, and go through those pastures there, and you *might* look by the birch tree, though she's not likely to be there. And let's all remember that if any girl tries to join us, we're to treat her abominably, so she'll know she isn't wanted. It's mean, but there's no other way to do, because

Vivian'll never come back if she thinks any one else knows. Whoever finds her first, will give three loud calls in quick succession; and if by any chance we don't any of us find her, we're all to meet at the station for the five o'clock. But I know we'll be successful."

They started, each in the direction signified; and while they hurried through the woods, thinking only of Vivian, and of how if they ever found her, they would make her so happy she would forget all that had passed, the object of their thought and search crouched on the top of the big rock back of the Retreat, and hoped that the surrounding trees hid her quite from sight.

When the station agent half an hour ago had told her there was no train before five o'clock, her heart had sunk. What should she do? She could not linger around Hillcrest, for she was sure of meeting some of the girls. There was no place in which to hide near the village; and to walk to the nearest town ten miles away and take the train from there was out of the question. There seemed nothing to do but to retrace her steps toward St. Helen's, and hide in the woods until time for the next train. Then she must trust to luck, and run the risk of meeting the girls. Meanwhile, there was no time

to lose. It was fifteen minutes to three already, and in half an hour the girls would be through with study hour and out-of-doors.

She hurried up the village street, and out upon the country road, still in her sweater and little school hat. Her mother would doubtless be surprised to see her dressed that way, she thought to herself as she ran. She would wire her from Springfield. Yes, she would be surprised, but when she had heard the whole story, she would pity Vivian and welcome her home. And her father would probably laugh at her, call her a silly little girl, and then engage a tutor for her. It would not be easy to tell them, and might be very hard to make them understand; but she could bear that more easily than to stay at St. Helen's with the remembrance of Imogene's words in her ears.

Out of breath, she sat down by the roadside to rest for a few minutes. No, she could never forget Imogene's words! She saw her dressed ready to go, remembered how she had risen to kiss her, and how, instead of kissing her, Imogene had said, "Of course, you realize, Vivian, if you hadn't been such a little fool, and Dorothy such a coward, I wouldn't be going away like this!"

So they had really sent Imogene away — *expelled*

her! And Imogene had said that she was to blame, had gone without kissing her, had never written her in all that long week! No, it was all too much to be borne! Besides, it did not matter how good the girls had been to her since the evening when Virginia had rescued her from the carrying out of her foolish plan, she felt sure that in their hearts they despised her for having been so weak and so easily influenced. And now she could never show them that she meant to be different! Even Virginia and Priscilla whom she so dearly loved would never know! But she saw no other way.

Rising, she hurried on. The school clock struck three. She dashed through the gates and into the woods by the Retreat. In a few minutes the girls would be passing along the road, and she was in danger of being seen. Looking around for a hiding-place, she espied the big rock back of the Retreat, the very rock which the Vigilantes had chosen for their initiation ceremonies. A great pine which grew close by overhung it with wide-spreading, feathery branches. Vivian hastily climbed upon the rock, and, crawling in among the pine branches, was quite concealed from the sight of all except the most careful observer.

It was but a few moments before she heard voices

— on the meadow, in the road, even in the very woods about her. Study hour was over, and the girls were free. Well, if by any chance they drew near her place of concealment, she could take her Cæsar from her pocket and begin to study. That would tend to dispel suspicion. How jolly and merry they sounded! She could hear Bess Shepard's laugh, and some lusty shouts, which, of course, came from the Blackmore twins. She had had lovely times at St. Helen's. Of course even now, she might — but no, it was too late! Without doubt, by now some one had discovered her room, and everybody would know!

A loud crackling of twigs sounded to the right. Some one was coming in her direction — yes, some one in a red sweater, for she could distinguish that color through the thicket. She crouched lower under the pine branches. Then, seeing that it was of no use to hide, for the sweater was unmistakably coming through the bushes, she sat up-right with a beating heart and drew Cæsar from her pocket — just as Dorothy broke through the last blackberry bush and saw her on the rock. And though she tried her utmost to gaze at Cæsar, she just couldn't help seeing the joy and gladness that swept over Dorothy's anxious face.

"Oh, Vivian!" she cried. "Oh, Vivian! I've found you, and I'm so glad! And you're going to forgive me, and give me another chance to be your friend, aren't you? Oh, say you're not going away!"

In another moment Dorothy was on the rock beside her, and poor Cæsar had fallen into a rose-bush, where he lay forgotten. The five o'clock train was forgotten, too; for as Vivian sat there with Dorothy's arms around her, she knew she wouldn't do anything else in the world but go back and begin all over again.

"My!" said Dorothy, after they had talked everything over for the third time at least. "My! I forgot to give the signal, and Priscilla and Virginia are very likely half-dead from fright by now!"

She gave the three short calls agreed upon, which were immediately answered; and in less than five minutes the two Vigilantes, very much alive and very, very happy, were also sitting on the very rock chosen but two hours before. Then, after all the crooked things had been made straight, after the world seemed beautiful again, and friendship sweeter than before — then, with the ceremony befitting its importance, the Vigilante Order was explained in full to the chosen initiates, and its purpose

made plain. With serious faces they signed their names,

VIVIAN EVELYN WINTERS
DOROTHY RICHARDS

below the signatures of the charter members.

"Everything's over now," said the real originator of the order with a happy little sigh, as she folded the Constitution and placed it in her pocket. "Everything's over, and in another way, everything nicest is just beginning. There's certainly strength in numbers, and we'll all help one another to be real Vigilantes."

"We ought to have a watchword," proposed Priscilla. "I was thinking of one when I heard Dorothy call. Do you think 'Ever Vigilant' is any good?"

They all thought it just the thing.

"And I've been wondering just this minute," said Dorothy, "about something else; but I'm a new member, and if you don't like my plan, I hope you'll say so. I was thinking about having an emblem. Most orders do, you know. Don't you think it would be rather nice to have the hepatica, and have it stand for what Miss King said — sending our rootlets into good soil? You see, I thought of it

because — well, because I've felt so ashamed of — of the way my rootlets have been growing, and lately I've — I've been trying —" She hesitated, embarrassed.

Virginia had listened, her eyes growing brighter every moment.

"I think it's a perfectly lovely idea, Dorothy," she said, while Priscilla and Vivian nodded their approval. "And I've a secret just born — a lovely, lovely one — and it's going to happen before very long! It just came with your thought of the hepatica!"

The others were properly mystified, but the owner of the secret would divulge nothing; and half an hour later, Cæsar, having been rescued from the rose-bush, the four Vigilantes went home to help Vivian unpack.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HEART-BROKEN MISS WALLACE

"LUCILE, are you sure?"

"Virginia, if you ask me that again, I'll believe you think I fib. Of course I'm sure!"

"Did you see him more than once, Lucile?"

"Priscilla, I've told you a dozen times that I saw him one whole afternoon long at Versailles. Isn't that long enough to remember him, I'd like to know?"

"And Miss Wallace said when she introduced him — just what did she say, anyhow?"

"Vivian Winters, you make me sick! You really do! She said — and this is the twentieth time I've told you — she said, 'Lucile, I want you to meet my dear friend, Mr. Taylor.'"

"And what did he say?"

"Will you please listen this time, Dorothy, for it's positively the last time I shall tell you. He said, 'Any friend of Miss Wallace's is my friend, too.' And he gazed at her with his very soul. You forgot he had eyes at all!"

The exasperated Lucile leaned back among her pillows, and munched the candy with which she had generously supplied herself.

"You really all do make me tired," she said between her bites. "I've told you over and over again that any one could see that he loved her from the way he gazed at her; that the picture she's had all the year up to six weeks ago on her dresser was *his;* and that I *know* her heart is broken. Now, what more can I say?"

"It isn't that we don't believe you, Lucile," Virginia hastened to explain. "It's just — well, you see you do have a very romantic tendency, and —"

"Of course, I do. It's my temperament. I've heard father say so a dozen times. Besides, I've lived in Paris, and the very stones of Paris breathe romance!"

"Well, I really think Lucile is right, sad as it seems. Miss Wallace hasn't been herself since Easter; and it was just then that the picture disappeared from her dresser. Of course Lucile couldn't have been with him a whole afternoon and not know his face; and, naturally, she would know how he treated her." This announcement from Priscilla was not without effect.

"Of course I would," reiterated the encouraged

Lucile. "Didn't I see him gaze at her, and call her 'Margaret,' and her, when she called him 'Bob'?"

"Did you see him do anything but *gaze?*" asked Dorothy, still a little incredulous. "He seems to have gazed all the time."

"Why, of course, right at Versailles, he wouldn't have taken her hand, or anything like that. A gaze can speak volumes, I'll have you to know. But when we sailed from Havre, and he stayed to study at the Sorbonne, he put his arms around her and kissed her. It was thrilling!"

This new piece of information was indisputable proof, which, placed by the side of the strange disappearance of the said Mr. Taylor's picture, and the strange and unwonted sadness of Miss Wallace, formed a bulk of evidence, to disbelieve which was folly.

"Oh, I'm afraid it's true," said Virginia, echoing the misgivings of her room-mate. "She looks so quiet and sad, it just breaks my heart. I actually know she'd been crying the other day when I saw her coming out of the Retreat. Probably she went there for comfort. Poor thing! How could he have been so cruel?"

"Why, maybe it wasn't he. Maybe he's suffer-

ing, and pacing the streets of Paris this moment, preferring death to life." Lucile's imagination, so fruitless in the channels of academic thought, was certainly prolific in the flowery paths of Romance. "Perhaps, Miss Wallace felt the call to service, broke her engagement, and has decided to give her very life to help others."

"I don't think Miss Wallace would do that," Virginia said thoughtfully. "Not that it isn't a wonderful thing to do; but I feel some way as though she'd rather be a mother. One evening last Thanksgiving I was in her room, and we were talking about the things girls could do in the world. I asked her what she thought was the noblest thing; and she said in the sweetest voice, 'A real mother, Virginia.'"

"And she is just a born mother," added Priscilla. "Mother said so at Thanksgiving. Oh, dear! Why did it have to happen?"

No one pretended to know. Lucile was inclined to attribute it to Fate; while Dorothy advanced the thought that it might be a trial sent to prove Miss Wallace's strength.

"And it's wonderful how strong she is," she said. "She's usually so jolly at table; and last night she was the very life of the party. One would never have known."

"Yes, and she probably went home to a sleepless night," suggested Lucile, "and tossed about till morning."

"It seems to me she's been happier lately."

"She's probably learning to bear it better — that's all."

"She's never worn an engagement ring, has she?" asked the practical Vivian.

"No, but of course she wouldn't wear it here. It would excite too much comment," Priscilla explained.

"Without doubt she had one, and wore it around her neck, before *it* happened," Lucile again suggested.

"Oh, if we could only show her in some way that we're sorry for her! That would, perhaps, help a little," said Virginia. "Do you suppose she'd feel we were interfering if we sent her some flowers? We needn't say a thing, but just write 'With sympathy' or 'With love' on a card, and she'd understand. Do you think she'd like it, Priscilla?"

"Why, yes, I think she would. And 'twould relieve our minds. We'd know we'd done all we could. I suppose time will make it easier for her to bear."

"Maybe it's just a misunderstanding, and they'll

come together again, when they see they can't live without each other," said Vivian hopefully.

"Maybe, but I feel that it's the end! And oh, if you girls could only have seen them together and known that they were made for each other! Fate is cruel!" wailed Lucile tragically.

"Well, are we going to send the flowers?" asked Virginia. She was aching for Miss Wallace, but Lucile's romantic ravings were a little tiring. "If we do, let's not say a word to any one. Miss Wallace being in The Hermitage, belongs to us more anyway; and I think we ought to love her enough to guard her secret. I know she wouldn't wish it known. Of course, as things have happened, we can't help knowing, but we *can* help talking about it to others. You haven't told any one else, have you, Lucile?"

"Of course not. Don't you suppose I know better than all of you that life would be simply impossible to her if she thought the world knew. Remember, *I've* seen them together!"

"What kind of flowers do you think we'd better send?"

"Pink carnations."

"Oh, no, carnations are too common!"

"Violets then."

"Oh, spare her that! He gave her violets that afternoon at Versailles!"

"Roses, why not?"

"Anything but red roses. They mean undying love, and hers is dead."

"Why not send her daffodils?" proposed Virginia. "They're so cheery and hopeful, and look like spring."

Every one seemed agreed that, under the circumstances, Virginia's choice was the most appropriate. It was thereupon decided that daffodils be sent to Miss Wallace; but that, to save her possible embarrassment, the names of the donors be kept secret. Dorothy and Vivian were delegated to go to Hillcrest and make the purchase, while the others tried to enliven their sympathetic hearts by tennis.

Meanwhile, during this session of sympathy in her behalf, Miss Wallace sat in her school-room, correcting an avalanche of themes, which seemed to have no end. "Dear me!" she sighed to herself, "no girl in this whole school will be so glad of vacation as I. I've never taught through such a year."

It certainly had been a hard and trying year. In the fall Miss Green's tactlessness had required an extra amount of discretion on the part of Miss Wallace; in the winter the German Measles had broken

into the regularity necessary for good work; and all through the year she had been required to watch, which occupation she found harder than any other — watch a girl, to whom she had never been able to come close, and whom she had failed to influence toward better things. She could not really blame herself for her failure in helping Imogene, but she felt sorry, because, knowing Imogene, she feared that life would never hold what it might for her. Altogether, it had been a hard year; and she would not have been human had she not at times looked tired, thoughtful, and even sad.

"You need a rest, my dear," said the old Hillcrest doctor, meeting her one day in the village. "You're quite tired out, working for those nice girls up there." But that pile of themes did not look like immediate rest; and, sharpening her red pencil, she went to work again.

She left the school-room just as the warning-bell was ringing and crossed the campus to The Hermitage, longing for letters. On her desk she found a package and a telegram, which, when she had read it, made her tired face glow with happiness. "Dear Bob!" she said to herself. "He deserves it all. I'm so glad!"

"His picture has come back, too," she added, un-

tying the package, "just in time for the good news. You dear old fellow! You deserve a silver frame, and the nicest girl in the world."

There came a knock at her door just then, and the maid passed her a long box from the florist's. Surprised, she opened it to find dozens of yellow daffodils, and a card, which said in carefully disguised handwriting, "With deepest love, and tenderest sympathy."

"Why, what can it mean?" she thought mystified. "I always need the love, but I certainly don't need sympathy. I never was so happy in my life!"

The supper-bell rang just then, and put a stop to her wonderings. She dressed hurriedly, placed some daffodils at her waist, and descended to the dining-room, a trifle late, but wholly radiant.

"She surely doesn't look sad to-night," mused more than one at the table. "Could the flowers have made her happier so soon, or what is it?"

Half an hour before study hour, Miss Wallace called Virginia to her room.

"I know you love daffodils, Virginia," she said, "and I want you to see this gorgeous quantity which some mysterious person has sent me. And the strangest part about it is that they come with 'tenderest sympathy.' It's especially funny to-night,

because I'm so happy. I think I really must tell you about it."

Virginia's heart beat fast with excitement. Was this beloved teacher of hers really going to confide in her? Her eyes followed Miss Wallace's to the dresser, and there, reclothed in a shining silver frame, was Mr. Taylor — Miss Wallace's own Mr. Taylor! So it had been only a misunderstanding after all! The dream of Miss Wallace's life was not dead, but living, and she was happy! One glance at her face was proof of that! Virginia was so happy herself that she longed to tell her so; but perhaps she had best not just now. Besides, what was Miss Wallace saying?

"I don't know that I've ever told you about my cousin, Robert Taylor, Virginia. You've seen his picture of course — that is till recently when I sent it away to have it framed. To-night I had a cable from him, telling me that he's actually engaged to the dearest girl I know. We've both been hoping for it for months — I almost as much as he — and Mary's just decided that she can't get along without him. I'm so delighted!"

It seemed impossible that Virginia's heart could have undergone such a metamorphosis as it had in the last minute.

"Is — is — he your cousin?" she asked in a queer, strained little voice. But Miss Wallace was so happy that she did not notice it.

"Why, yes, he's really my cousin, but he seems like my brother, for his mother died when he was a baby, and my mother brought him up. So we've always lived together, just like brother and sister, and I never think of any difference. Why, my dear, where are you going? The bell hasn't rung." For Virginia was half way out of the door.

"I — must go," she stammered. "The girls are waiting for me up-stairs."

Four more crestfallen and unromantic girls never existed than those which looked at one another at the conclusion of Virginia's story.

"I never felt so silly in my life!" she added, after the last rainbow-colored bubble had been burst.

"Nor I!" cried Priscilla.

"Let's be everlastingly grateful we didn't sign our names," said Dorothy.

"And he was just away being framed!" moaned Vivian.

"Where's Lucile?"

"Oh, she's probably moaning in her room over Fate!"

"She needs a tonic!" said Priscilla. "Let's go and tell her so."

"It won't do a bit of good," Virginia observed, as they started down the hall to employ the remaining five minutes in disciplining Lucile. "It's her temperament, you know; and, besides, the very stones of Paris breathe Romance!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE SENIOR PAGEANT

COMMENCEMENT came with hurrying feet, showing little regard for Seniors, who daily visited the old haunts, grown so dear to them, and hourly hated worse the thought of leaving St. Helen's. Every spot seemed dearer than ever before — the cottages, which had been their homes, the Retreat, filled with the memories of chapel and vespers, every path in the woods, every spot where certain flowers grew. It would be hard to leave them all; but far harder to say good-by to one another, and to the teachers and girls who were to return; for, as Anne said on every possible occasion, "There's no use talking! It never will seem the same again!" So in all the festivities of the closing days there was a sadness — a strange hollow feeling in one's body, a lump which often came unexpectedly into one's throat.

To Virginia, this season of her first Commencement was one of conflicting emotions. She was torn between a joy in the perfect June days, and a

sorrow that they must soon come to an end; between the happy anticipation of seeing her father, who, with her grandmother and Aunt Nan, was to be at St. Helen's for the closing week, and the sad realization that St. Helen's would never seem the same without the Seniors, and that The Hermitage would be a sadly different place without Mary and Anne.

She found studying during those last few weeks the most difficult thing in the world; and had it not been for the cup competition between Hathaway and The Hermitage, which was daily growing more close, she, like many of the others, would have been sorely tempted to take a vacation. It would be so much more "vital," she said to herself, and ten times more appropriate, to close her geometry and walk through the woods with Priscilla, or sit in Mary's room, and plan for the wonderful days to come; for Mrs. Williams had "found a way," and Jack and Mary were actually to spend the month of August in Wyoming with Virginia and Donald. The trip was to be their Commencement gift, for Jack was likewise graduating that year from the Stanford School. "It's too good to be true," Virginia kept saying to herself, "it's too good to be true," and deep in her heart she hoped and hoped that Mr. and

Mrs. Winthrop might consent to Priscilla's going also. They had said they would "think about it," and that, so Priscilla said, was a hopeful sign.

As she bent over her geometry, preparing for the final examination, there would come before her eyes in place of circles and triangles and parallelograms, visions of sunny August days riding over the foothills, and starlit August nights about a camp-fire in the canyon. It would be such fun for her and Don to show Mary and Jack all the loveliest places in their country. And she would teach Mary to shoot — Mary, who had never in her life held a rifle! Oh, if only the other Vigilantes might come! But she knew that Dorothy was to be in California with her father; and as to Vivian, Virginia could somehow easily picture the horror on timid Mrs. Winter's face at the thought of Vivian shooting and camping in a canyon! But this was not mastering geometry, and there was the cup! The Hermitage *must* win it from Hathaway, and the winning or the losing depended upon the success or failure of each one. So, banishing dreams, she went to work again.

There were but ten days more. Already it was examination week; already many of the traditional ceremonies and closing occasions had taken place. The Juniors had "picnicked" the Seniors, and the

Seniors the Juniors; the cottage tennis finals had been played off, Overlook winning the doubles, and Bess Shepard being proclaimed the champion in the ensuing singles; the Senior ivy had been planted against the wall of the Retreat, and the old trowel presented with fitting remarks to the Junior president. By the cottages the Senior occupants had each planted her own slip of ivy, her name placed in a securely corked bottle, and buried beneath the roots of her plant. Thus in our own minds do we become immortal!

But the occasion upon which all thoughts were centered, and toward which all energies were bent, was the Senior Pageant, to be held on Tuesday afternoon of the closing week. On preceding Commencements, an out-of-door play had been the choice of the graduating class; but this year the Seniors, who had been throughout their four years unusually interested in History, had determined to give in place of the play a Historical Pageant. Each was to represent some character of History, legendary or ancient, mediæval or modern, design and make her own costume, and dramatize the certain scene or scenes which she had chosen to portray. The Juniors and members of the lower classes, though not of importance as prominent characters,

were yet of indispensable value as retainers, henchmen, pages, and the like.

"In fact," said the Blackmore twins, who were the blindfolded headsmen, leading the procession of the doomed Mary Stuart to the block; "in fact, we may not seem very important, but we're the setting and they couldn't do without us!"

For weeks, even for months, they had been making preparations and holding rehearsals. The place chosen for the pageant was the level strip of meadow south of the campus. Directly back of it lay the Retreat woods, which were very convenient for the disappearance of the characters when their parts were finished, and especially so for Martin Luther, who had to nail his ninety-five theses on the door of the Retreat. On the left the road led to St. Helen's; on the right stretched more woodland; while immediately in front of the ground chosen for the performance, a gently sloping hillside formed a splendid amphitheater from which the audience was to view the pageant. Nature had surely done her best to provide an ideal situation; and the girls were going to try to do as well.

Virginia had found her services in great demand, and she was glad and proud to give them. Anne had determined to be her beloved Joan of Arc, and

had planned to appear in three scenes — in the forest of Domremy, where she listened to the voices; in the company of the old village priest, with whom she talked of her visions; and finally on the journey toward the Dauphin, whom she was to recognize among his courtiers. In the last scene a horse was necessary, for Joan, clad in armor, rode, accompanied by the old priest and two knights. Also, the Black Prince clamored for a war-horse; Augustus said he never could be august without one; and Roland refused to die in the Pass of Roncesvalles, unless he could first fall from his panting steed! Matters early in the spring having come to a halt over the horse problem, Miss King was consulted, and upon Virginia's assurance, ably seconded by that of Mr. Hanly, that Napoleon would be a perfectly safe addition to the troupe, his services were engaged for rehearsals and final performance alike, and he was installed in St. Helen's stable, so as to be on hand whenever desired.

Joan, never having been on a horse before, though born and bred in the South, needed considerable instruction, as did the other equestrian actresses; and Virginia found herself installed as riding-mistress for a good many hours each week. Napoleon did not seem averse to his part in the pageant, though

sometimes he shook his head disdainfully when the Black Prince strapped some armor over it, and objected slightly to the trappings which Augustus felt necessary for his successful entry into Rome. Virginia's saddle, bedecked for the occasion, was found adequate for all the riders; and after many, many attempts, followed by very frank criticisms from the riding-mistress, most of the performers could mount and dismount with something resembling ease. Virginia, knowing well Napoleon's variety of gaits, did not hope for equestrianism on the part of the riders. If they could only get on safely, sit fairly straight, and get off without catching their feet or clothing, she would rest content; and though Roland and the Black Prince were determined to use their spurs and come out from the forest on the gallop, Virginia, having raised them from the ground after two of these disastrous attempts, urged them with all her might to allow Napoleon to walk, which he was very glad to do.

But Joan, it must be admitted, found her last act a trying one. Though she mounted in the recesses of the forest, and could have all the assistance she needed, to ride before the audience, holding her spear aloft in one hand, and driving with the other was well-nigh impossible, especially when she

longed to grasp the saddle-horn; and lastly, to dismount safely, without catching on some part of that fearful saddle and irretrievably loosening her armor, was an act she feared and dreaded day and night.

"Oh, why did I choose to be Joan!" she cried, as Virginia, at a private rehearsal, raised her from the ground after at least the twentieth attempt to dismount. "I just can't do it!"

"Yes, you can," encouraged her instructor, who, when occasion demanded, coached the dramatic appearance as well as the equestrian. "You're beautiful when you hear the voices in the forest, and when you talk with the old priest, you're thrilling! Only, I do wish Lucile would be more priestly. Of course, she speaks French wonderfully, but she isn't one bit like a priest. It's too bad, when you're so wonderful in that scene."

"Well, you see, she didn't want to be the priest, anyway. She wanted to be the Black Prince's sweetheart."

"He didn't have a sweetheart, did he?"

"I don't know. It doesn't seem as though he would at seventeen. But she wanted him to, anyway, and say farewell to her in England."

"She does make me sick! Now, Anne, I've just

one criticism. You're going to learn to dismount all right; but if you'd only look less scared when you ride toward the Dauphin! You know you ought to look soulful, as though you were seeing a distant vision, but you don't. You look frightened to death."

"Then I look just the way I feel, Virginia. I'd rather ride an elephant than that Napoleon. I *am* scared of him, and I may as well admit it. He's the most terrorizing animal I've ever known!" And nothing that Napoleon's trainer could say as to his harmlessness and even amicability of disposition, could convince the trembling Joan, who, in perseverance and fear, still continued to *make* herself dismount.

But when the last Saturday came, all difficulties seemed overcome. Joan had actually dismounted successfully half a dozen times; the Black Prince had, after all, decided that he was more impressive when his charger walked; and Queen Elizabeth had ridden three times in her carriage, borne by eight staggering retainers, without its once breaking down. No more rehearsals were to be held until the final one on Tuesday morning; and costumes were packed away, while Napoleon gratefully munched his oats in St. Helen's stable, and won-

dered at the unaccustomed respite he was enjoying.

On that Saturday came Virginia's father with her Grandmother Webster and Aunt Nan. She had never been so happy in her life, she thought, as she walked excitedly up and down the platform, and waited for the train. Would her father find her much changed, she wondered, and would he look the same? Never before in their lives had they been separated, and nine months seemed a very long time. His letter of yesterday had been written from Vermont where he had visited a week, and where, he told her, he had been very happy. And her grandmother had also written, saying how much they were enjoying him. She was so glad, she said to herself, as the train whistled in the distance — so thankful that at last Grandmother Webster was beginning to appreciate her father. If it were really true, she simply couldn't be any happier.

It was really true! Of that she was assured. For after her father had jumped from the train to hold his little daughter close in his arms for a moment, he had turned to help her grandmother, who was just alighting, and whom, to Virginia's great joy, he called "Mother." Then her grandmother kissed her, and said to her father, "John, hasn't she

grown?"; and jolly Aunt Nan, who came up in the rear, hugged her hard, and said in the most understanding kind of way, "Now this whole family is together at last!" Finally, as if to add the finishing touch and make everything complete, Grandmother Webster, after she and Aunt Nan had greeted Miss King, who stood on the platform, said, "And I think, years ago, you met my son, Virginia's father."

The next three days were like the perfect realization of a dream. "The whole family" roamed together about the campus; listened to the farewell sermon, which the white-haired bishop gave on Sunday morning in the chapel, and the last vesper service, at which every one cried; heard the Senior essays on Monday afternoon; and attended Miss King's reception on Monday evening. It seemed like a great family reunion with all the fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters; and it took no time at all for everybody to become acquainted with everybody else. Virginia proudly introduced her father to all the girls; and it was not long before the four Vigilantes and their adviser were listening to tales of the real Vigilante days.

"And I hope you'll every one come to Wyoming for August," he said genially. "You'll be well-

chaperoned, for Virginia's Aunt Nan is coming, and there's room and a welcome for all."

That night Priscilla, before they went to sleep, confided her hopes to Virginia.

"I saw mother and dad talking with your father and Aunt Nan to-night, when we were helping serve," she whispered, "and I know they were talking about *it!* Oh, Virginia, do you really suppose I'll be there?"

"I'm thinking on it every minute I have," came back the whispered answer. "Aunt Nan's going will make a big difference; and some way I just *know* you're coming, Priscilla!"

Tuesday dawned beautifully, setting at rest many anxious hearts, which had bade their owners rise from bed at intervals during the night to study the heavens. At ten o'clock a strictly private dress rehearsal was held on the meadow. Virginia, who was one of Queen Elizabeth's pages, ran about in doublet and hose, and directed those who rode Napoleon. Everything went along with perfect smoothness. Martin Luther, who was Mary, nailed his theses with resounding strokes upon the church door, and then in a fiery and original Latin oration denounced the sale of "Indulgences"; and Mary, Queen of Scots, was led to execution, without the

headsmen giggling, as they had invariably done on every other occasion. Miss Allan, the History teacher, declared herself delighted.

"It's perfect!" she said enthusiastically. "Now you may go where you like, except those in the last Joan of Arc scene. I want you to try that dismounting again, Anne, and don't let your voice tremble when you address the Dauphin."

"My voice will tremble until I say good-by to Napoleon forever," thought Anne to herself as she mounted in the woods, and rode out on the meadow, preceded by her priest, and followed by two retainers, who kept at a very respectful distance from Napoleon's heels. She drew near the Dauphin and his assembled court, halted her steed, and prepared to dismount. But, in some way, she lost her balance, and fell to the ground, her left foot caught in the stirrup. Had Napoleon moved it might have been a serious happening; but he stood calmly looking on, even before Virginia had grasped his bridle. Then Miss Allan released Anne's foot, while the Dauphin and his court sympathized.

Anne had wrenched her ankle, and could not mount Napoleon again. That was certain. It was possible for her to perform her first and second acts, for in the first she did not walk about at all, and the

scene with the priest required but a few steps. But the last was, under the circumstances, utterly impossible, and, unless a substitute could be found, must be omitted.

Poor Joan sat on the ground and tried to smile, while Miss Allan rubbed her aching ankle.

"I think it's really providential," she said, "because I'd have been sure to fall this afternoon. Virginia can do my last part splendidly. My costume will fit her all right, and I'm quite content with hearing the voices and talking with the priest. You'll do it, won't you, Virginia?"

"Why, of course, I will, if Miss Allan thinks best. My French isn't like yours, Anne. Oh, I'm so sorry it happened!"

"Well, it's fortunate we have you, Virginia," said Miss Allan. "You know the part perfectly, and your pronunciation will have to do. Besides, you ride well enough to make up for it."

Joan was lifted on Napoleon, where, having no spear to carry and both hands free to clutch the saddle, she felt quite fearless, especially since Virginia led her steed; and, followed by a train of sympathetic courtiers, was carried to The Hermitage, where her ankle, which was not badly hurt, was carefully bandaged. Meanwhile, Virginia, raised all at

once to the dignity of a Senior, rehearsed her lines, and tried with the help of Lucile to pronounce the impossible French syllables.

By three o'clock that afternoon the hillside amphitheater was crowded with guests, the number of relatives and friends being increased by many Hillcrest residents, who never failed to enjoy the Commencement "doings." Prominent among those who awaited appearance of the pageant, was a tall, soldierly-looking gentleman, who sat beside Virginia's father, and seemed to enjoy talking of a certain little girl, with whom he had journeyed East nine months before. Every now and then he bestowed proud glances upon his grandson, who had accompanied him, and who had already found in Jack Williams a pleasant companion.

"I couldn't resist bringing my grandson to meet Miss Virginia," the old gentleman explained, "and I'm doubly glad I did come, for I'm delighted to meet her father."

Virginia's father evidently enjoyed Colonel Standish, for they found many subjects of conversation, and talked until a herald, clad in crimson and white, the Senior colors, appeared from the forest, and blowing a trumpet, announced in quaint language that the pageant was about to begin:

"Lords and ladies, passing fair,
I would now to you declare
That before your very eyes
Those from out the past arise."

The first to arise from out the shadowy past were Hector and Andromache, clad in Trojan costumes. In Homer's tongue they bade each other farewell, while Andromache lifted her infant son (the janitor's baby, borrowed for the occasion) to kiss his fierce father, armed with helmet, shield, and spear, before he should go out to fight the great Achilles. True to the Homeric legend, the baby cried in fright, and was hurriedly returned to the janitor's wife, who waited in the shadow of the trees. Demosthenes hurled in good Greek a "philippic" against the Macedonian King, and Cicero cursed Cataline in fiery Latin. Then followed the great Augustus, who sat upon the much-bedecked Napoleon and gloried in his triumph; Roland, who fell gallantly from his steed in the Pass of Roncesvalles, blowing his horn with his last breath to warn the soldiers of Charlemagne of his disaster; and the Black Prince, who, on his way to Crecy, paused to give an oration on the valor of the English.

Now it was time for Joan of Arc, who, her peasant robes covering her bandaged ankle, sat in the

forests of Domremy, and with sweet, up-turned face listened to the voices of angels. Convinced that she had a mission to perform, she sought the old priest as he walked one day in the forest, and told him of her visions; but he, in perfect though rather half-hearted French, discouraged her, and sent her home to help her mother in the kitchen. A year passed, and Joan having at last convinced the priest and the governor of Domremy, was allowed to proceed to the Dauphin, and declare her message from God.

In the last scene, a new Joan, clad in a shining helmet, a suit of armor, and bearing a shield and spear, rode from the wood into the meadow. She sat her horse like a knight of old, holding her reins in her left hand, on which arm she bore her shield, and in her right hand bearing her spear aloft. In her gray eyes was the memory of the Domremy visions; on her face the determination to save her country. Before her walked the little priest, who could not resist glancing back every now and then to be sure Napoleon was not too near his heels. Behind her on either side came two armed retainers.

As the Maid of Orleans neared the audience, she was greeted by applause, which pleased her even less than it pleased a certain little group in the center of the gathering. She rode on toward the end of the

"SHE SAT HER HORSE LIKE A KNIGHT OF OLD."

meadow, where next the woods stood the disguised Dauphin and his courtiers. As she reached the first of the Dauphin's men-at-arms, she halted her steed, swung her armor-clad body lightly to the ground, and advanced with intent gaze toward him, whom she knew to be Charles, the future king.

Meanwhile, Napoleon, weary of this pomp and pageantry, and feeling his back free at last from knights and emperors, moved slowly to a near-by birch tree, and began to nibble at its fresh new leaves. Joan's retainers had followed her, and as there was no one to forbid him to take refreshment, he ate on undisturbed. Suddenly at his very nose sounded a blare of trumpets. They proclaimed the Domremy peasant girl to be what she had declared herself — the deliverer of her country. But Napoleon knew nothing of proclamations or deliverers. All he knew was that he had been rudely disturbed and needlessly startled — he, who had uncomplainingly worn trappings of every description and borne Augustus and Roland, the Black Prince and Joan!

The trumpets sounded again in his ears. This time he answered with a terrifying snort, kicked up his heels and started down the meadow, his tasseled blanket, for with this new Joan he wore no saddle, dragging on the ground. Joan, in the act of receiv-

ing the homage of the Dauphin and his court, saw him go. She sprang to her feet, mediæval manners forgotten, threw aside her spear and shield, and started in pursuit. She forgot that she was to save France; but she *knew* she was to save the Earl of Leicester embarrassment from having no steed to ride, when he should advance in the next act to greet Queen Elizabeth.

The progress of Napoleon was somewhat lessened by his robes in which he became often entangled, and by his desire for more fresh birch leaves. Within five minutes Joan was near him, her helmet long since gone, her armor more or less depleted, her hair streaming in the wind. She was no longer the gentle maid of Domremy; she was a Wyoming girl who was catching her horse.

"Oh, John!" cried Grandmother Webster, who with frightened eyes watched her granddaughter in this somewhat strange proceeding. "Oh, John, how can you laugh! She'll be hurt!"

"No, she won't, mother," her father answered. "She's used to that sort of thing. Don't worry."

"She's the pluckiest girl I ever saw in my life!" cried the Colonel, slapping his knee. "Joan of Arc wasn't in it!" And his grandson, who had risen to his feet and was cheering as though he were

at a foot-ball game, kept shouting between his cheers:

"Say, but she's a corker!"

Now she was running beside Napoleon. Suddenly she grasped his reins, and stopped him just as he was nearing the road, and thinking without doubt that he would escape to his Hillcrest stable where pageantry was unknown. She straightened his bedraggled robes as well as she could, then with one hand on his neck, sprang to his back with as much ease as though he had been a Shetland pony, and, amid the cheers of the audience, rode back to receive the homage, not only of the Dauphin, but of the gathering at large.

The pageant proceeded. Queen Elizabeth, borne by her eight retainers, was received by a somewhat trembling Earl of Leicester, who did not seem at all sure of his steed; Mary Stuart was dignity and courage itself as she marched to the scaffold, led by two perfectly serious headsmen; and Martin Luther eclipsed even his rehearsal of the morning. But none like the second Joan was prompted by necessity to forget the bonds of History, and establish a new tradition to add to the hundreds already clustering about St. Helen's.

"For," said the white-haired bishop, shaking

hands with her, as she stood in her page's costume of doublet and hose, surrounded by an admiring group, " St. Helen's girls will never forget this Joan, though their memory may be hazy as to her of Domremy; just as they'll always remember St. Helen's champion chimney-sweep, and probably forget all about Charles Kingsley's. Isn't that so, my dear?" And he turned with a quizzical smile toward the Blackmore twin, who had dropped into the grate before his astonished eyes the year before.

" Well," said Carver Standish III, as bearing Joan's spear and shield, he accompanied her across the campus, " well, all I've got to say is, Miss Hunter, you surely are a winner! And I'm some glad grandfather brought me over to meet you!"

" I'm glad, too," answered the happy Joan, " but I'm not Miss Hunter, I'm just Virginia. You see I'm especially anxious not to be a young lady when I get back home."

CHAPTER XX

THE VIGILANTES' LAST MEETING

"It's absolutely unbelievable!" cried Priscilla.

"It's a fairy-tale!" said Vivian.

"I'll just count the minutes till August!" declared Virginia.

"Mine is a reward for getting all *A's*," said Priscilla. "My! but I'm glad I worked!"

"I'm thankful papa came for Commencement," said Vivian. "Mamma would never have said 'Yes.' She still thinks I'm going to be killed. Are you sure you have room for us all, Virginia? Is a ranch large?"

"Of course we have room. Besides, I sleep in a tent summers."

"Oh, may we, too?"

"Why, yes, if you like. Mary wants to. It's lovely out-of-doors."

"Aren't there any rattle-snakes around?"

"Only on the hills, and in rocky and sandy places. Oh, Dorothy, we're selfish talking like this when you can't come!"

"No, you're not. I dote on hearing about it. I wish I could come, but I'm glad I'm going to be with father. It makes me frightfully proud to think he wants me to keep house for him; and we're going to have a heavenly little bungalow right by the ocean. It will be lovely, I think; and we haven't been together for so long, it will be like getting acquainted over again."

"I think it's splendid, Dorothy," said Priscilla, "and I'm so proud of you! Mother is too — she said so. And being all Vigilantes, we'll be together in thought, anyway. Oh, Virginia, I think your father was perfectly lovely to give us our pins!"

"Wonderful!" cried Dorothy.

"They're the sweetest things!" said Vivian.

"Wasn't that your secret when we held our first meeting in May?" asked Dorothy.

"Yes, that was it. When you mentioned the hepatica, I thought how lovely it would be to have little hepatica pins. I wrote father all about it, and he said he'd love to have them made for us as a gift from him. They are sweet! I love them!"

She lifted hers from her blouse and examined it, while the other Vigilantes did the same. They were little hepaticas in dull gold. In the heart of each glowed three small pearls; and in a circle around

the pearls were engraved in tiny letters the words, "Ever Vigilant."

"They'll be such a help to us this summer, I think," said Dorothy. "I know mine will. It will help me remember — lots of things."

They were sitting on their rock back of the Retreat. It was afternoon of the day following the pageant, and this was their last Vigilante meeting.

"Doesn't it seem as though everything had come out just right?" asked Priscilla after a little pause. "This morning in chapel when Miss King announced that we'd won the cup, I could have screamed, I was so glad! And that's due to you, Dorothy, more than to any one else. Just think of your Latin examination! Miss Baxter has put it in the exhibit of class work. I'm so glad!"

"I can't help feeling glad, too. But then it isn't any more than I ought to have done toward my share of winning the cup. I helped toward losing it the first of the year."

"Oh, don't let's talk about that part — ever again!" cried the founder of the Vigilantes. "It's never going to happen any more, and that's what makes me so happy, because now we understand each other, and next year we'll all be working for the same thing! Oh, I get happier every minute!"

"Won't it be lovely to have the Blackmores in The Hermitage?"

"Has Miss King really said they could come?"

"Yes, Jess told me this morning after chapel. At least, she's going to try them for three months."

"They're going to Germany this summer. I wonder what they'll learn to do over there!"

"You can depend upon it they'll learn something! You'll have enough to do to keep them straight, Priscilla."

"Oh, dear," said Priscilla. "Why did you ever choose me monitor? I'll probably get into more scrapes than any one else, especially with the Blackmores around. I'll try to be like Mary, but I know I can't."

"Oh, won't we miss Mary and Anne?"

"Anne's going abroad, too, with her mother; and then she's going to college in the fall with Mary."

"College seems so far away, and so big some way. I'm glad we're going to be at St. Helen's."

A bell sounded across the campus.

"It's time for the Senior song," said Priscilla. "We must go in a minute. I'm going to take a piece of pine for my Memory Book to remember the last meeting."

They all followed her example. Then, standing

on the big rock with their arms around one another's shoulders, they repeated earnestly their Vigilante principles:

"We stand for fair play and true friendship."

"And for taking care of our roots," added Virginia, as a postscript.

Then they scrambled down from the rock, and ran through the wood path to the campus, where the lower classes were gathering for the annual Senior song, which was held the last day of Commencement. From the woods north of the campus came the twenty Seniors in white dresses. They marched two by two between long lines of crimson ribbon, which they held. As they drew near the campus where the other classes awaited them, they sang their Senior song.

"We're the St. Helen's Seniors,
The crimson and the white,
We stand for fun and friendship,
For loyalty and right,
We'll ever praise St. Helen's,
Her wisdom and her fame,
The only school in all this land
Our loyalty can claim."

Cheers from Juniors, Sophomores, and Freshmen greeted them. They marched to all the buildings, before each one singing farewell songs, written by

Senior poets; and then back again to the gathering-place of the admiring lower classes, who, as they approached, rose, and with greater volume, but no greater feeling, saluted them with a song, also written expressly for the occasion.

"Farewell to the Seniors,
We'll surely miss you sore
When we come back again next fall,
And find you here no more.
We'll try to follow in your steps,
Of loyalty and right,
And never, never will forget
The crimson and the white."

CHAPTER XXI

HOME ONCE MORE

"Oh, father, it looks just the same! There are our mountains that Colonel Standish and I said good-by to. Oh, daddy, I've missed the mountains so! And there are the foot-hills! Aren't they green? And see the flowers on them! Oh, there's a shooting star! I saw it in the hollow as we passed. And aren't the grain fields lovely with the wind sweeping over them? Oh, father, won't the girls just love it? And won't it be perfectly lovely to have them? I never saw any one so happy as Carver Standish when he said you had asked him. The Colonel was smiling all over, too. It will be a regular house-party, won't it? And isn't it wonderful that Aunt Nan's coming with all of them? Oh, father, weren't we happy in Vermont, and isn't it just the loveliest thing in all the world that we have grandmother and Aunt Nan for our very own? I know mother would be happy, don't you?"

"I'm sure she would be very happy, dear. It's

what we used to hope for years ago. And I'm the happiest man in all Wyoming to have my little daughter back, and I'm more glad than ever that I sent her away to school."

"Oh, I'm so glad that I can't help thinking about it. Just think if I'd never gone, I'd never have known Priscilla — isn't she dear, father? — or Dorothy, or Mary and Anne, or those dear, funny Blackmore twins, or Vivian — Vivian seems silly, father, but she isn't really, she's fine underneath, you'll see — or Miss King, or darling Miss Wallace — oh, daddy, wasn't she too dear for anything when she said good-by? She kissed me twice. It's selfish to notice, but I couldn't help it. She's one of my very dearest friends. Didn't you like her especially?"

"Very much, dear. See, we're coming nearer. We've crossed the creek bridge. Better put on your hat."

Fifteen minutes later they had left the dingy little station and were driving along the country road between fields of waving grain, the proud Dick being holder of the reins. Virginia plied him with eager questions.

"Oh, Dick, how is the colt?"

"Fine, Miss Virginia. We put him on the range last month."

"THE ROAD LAY AT THE VERY BASE OF THE GREEN FOOT-HILLS."

"And how's Pedro?"

"He's fine, too."

"Have the little collies grown much?"

Dick laughed. "They're not little any more, Miss Virginia."

"And how are Alec and Joe and Hannah and Mr. Weeks and William?"

"They're first-rate, and all anxious to see you."

Virginia clung closer to her father's hand. "It seems strange, doesn't it, father," she whispered, her voice breaking, "and — and sad not to have Jim drive us home?"

For miles they drove across the broad prairies, past grain fields and through barren, unirrigated stretches. Then at last they turned a bend in the road, and there before them lay the nearer foot-hills, with the higher ranges above, and far above all the mountains — still snow-covered.

"They look really friendly this morning with the sun on them," said Virginia, "and they ought to when I love them so, and am coming back to them."

They turned again. This time the road lay at the very base of the green foot-hills, upon which cattle and horses were feeding. On the side of one of the hills rose a great spruce, and on the

ground near it, Virginia's quick eyes caught a glow of color.

"Is that—?" she whispered to her father.

"Yes," he said softly. "That's where Jim lies. We fenced in the range for a good distance all around the tree so the cattle couldn't go there; and William tended some plants all winter so that he could put them there early in the spring. They're all in blossom now, you see."

Virginia could not speak. She watched the great spruce and the color beneath it, until they rounded the hill and both were hidden from sight. Then she put her head against her father's shoulder, while he, understanding, held her close. Jim's absence was the only shadow upon her home-coming. Nothing would seem the same without him; and now that he was gone, the girls would never understand why it was that she had loved him so. If they could only have seen him, then they would have known!

"You can see home now, little girl," said her father.

She raised her head eagerly. Yes, there it was—the green wheat fields, the avenue of tall cottonwoods whose leaves were fluttering in the wind, the long white ranch-house, from the window of

which some one was waving a red handkerchief.

"Hannah!" cried Virginia, as she waved her own handkerchief in answer.

A few minutes more and they were driving beneath the cottonwoods. Around the corner of the house bounded the collie dogs, the pups indistinguishable from their mother, to give them welcome; in the doorway stood Hannah, her face bright with joy; and by Virginia's flower-bed, in which spikes of blue larkspur, reaching to her window, were brave with bloom, stood William — a new William, with the sadness and the failures quite gone from his face.

"Oh, William," cried Virginia, jumping from the carriage, and running up to him; "oh, William, it's next best to having Jim to have you — like this!"

That afternoon Elk Creek Valley lay bathed in June sunshine. It had never seemed so beautiful — at least to a certain boy and girl, who rested their horses on the brow of the Mine, and looked off across a creek bordered by cottonwoods and merry, laughing quaking-asps, across a blue-green sea of waving grain, to the distant, snow-furrowed moun-

tain peaks. Some magpies flew chattering over the prairie and among the quaking-asps; a meadow lark sang from a near-by tree-stump; and two cotton-tail rabbits chased each other across the open space between the creek and the foot-hills, and played hide-and-seek behind the sage-brush.

"Isn't it the loveliest place in all the world, Don?" the girl almost whispered. "I know I'll not be any happier when I get to Heaven. And some way the mountains are friendlier than ever. Perhaps because I love them better now I'm home again."

"It is lovely," the boy answered. "The finest country anywhere! I'm mighty glad you're home again, Virginia; but the thing I'm most glad about is, that you aren't a young lady after all!"

THE END

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